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HENRY DAVID THOREAU







HENRY DAVID THOREAU

From a Crayon drawing made in 1857

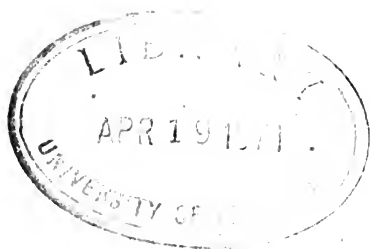
THE LIFE
OF
HENRY DAVID THOREAU

BY
H. S. SALT



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PREFATORY NOTE

IN sending forth this volume, I wish to express my gratitude for the assistance kindly given me by several surviving friends of Thoreau, and some well-known students of his writings. I have received new information on many points of interest, in some cases with copies of unpublished documents, from Mr. F. B. Sanborn, Mr. Harrison G. O. Blake, Mr. Daniel Ricketson, Mr. Edward Hoar, Colonel T. W. Higginson, and Dr. E. W. Emerson, all of whom were personally associated with Thoreau. I am also under obligations to Dr. A. H. Japp ("H. A. Page"), Mr. John Burroughs, Mr. William Sloane Kennedy, Dr. Samuel A. Jones, who generously placed at my service his recently printed bibliography, and other correspondents.

I must further acknowledge my indebtedness to previously published Memoirs, especially those by

Channing and Sanborn. My particular purpose has been to combine the various records and reminiscences of Thoreau, many of which are inaccessible to the majority of readers, and so to present what may supply a real want—a comprehensive account of his life, and a clear estimate of his ethical teaching.

H. S. S.

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ERRATA

Page 29, line 26, *for* "yet" *read* "get."

Page 158, line 12, *read* "I'll warrant you *enough* to season the dish with."

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

CHAPTER I

YOUTH

It is observable that in each phase of civilised society the excess of any particular tendency is often redressed and relieved by some counteracting and admonitory manifestation, which, by emphasising such principles as are in danger of being undervalued or forgotten, serves to restore a just balance, and to secure a full and healthy, instead of a partial development. As, in Hindoo mythology, the legendary Avatar descends to set right the moral and physical disorders which disturb the world, so, in the actual history of social progress, we trace the action of this compensatory process. The natural hedonism of the Greeks is reproved by the Stoic philosophy, the pragmatical Pharisaism of the Jews by the mystic quietism of the Essenes, the enervating luxury of the Roman empire by the stern asceticism of the Anchorites, the tyranny of medieval Catholicism by the freedom of the Renaissance.

Of the various perils which beset the path of our modern civilisation, none, perhaps, are more subtle and dangerous than those which may be summed up under the term *artificiality*. As life becomes more complex, and men of culture are withdrawn farther and farther from touch with wild nature, there is a corresponding sacrifice of hardihood and independence—there is less intellectual individuality, less mastery over circumstance, less rigid probity of conduct and candour of speaking, less faith in one's self and in the leading of one's destiny. These are doubtless but incidental disadvantages, outweighed by the general improvement in the condition of the race; yet they are serious enough to demand thoughtful recognition, and to make us welcome any signs of a contrary and corrective tendency.

The enormous increase which the present age has witnessed in material wealth and mechanical invention has accentuated both the magnitude of the evil and the necessity of relieving it. Three-quarters of a century ago, it might have occurred to those who were living on the threshold of the new era, and who foresaw (as some must have foreseen) the coming rush of civilisation, with its fretful hurry and bustle of innumerable distractions, to wonder whether the prevailing malady would once again work out its own reformation. Must society ever be divorced from simplicity? Must intellect and wildness be incompatible? Must we

lose in the deterioration of the physical senses what we gain in mental culture? Must perfect communion with Nature be impossible? Or would there be another compensatory movement, which should produce a man capable of showing us in his own character—whatever its shortcomings and limitations—that it is still possible and profitable to live, as the Stoics strove to live, in accordance with Nature, with absolute serenity and self-possession; to follow out one's own ideal, in spite of every obstacle, with unfaltering devotion; and so to simplify one's life, and clarify one's senses, as to master many of the inner secrets of that book of Nature which to most men remains unintelligible, unopened, and unread. Such anticipation—if we may imagine it to have been entertained—was amply fulfilled in the life and character of Henry David Thoreau.

In the year 1823 there was living in the village of Concord, Massachusetts, with his wife and four children, one John Thoreau, a pencil-maker by employment, whose father, a younger son in a well-to-do Jersey family of French extraction, emigrated from St. Helier to New England in 1773, married a Scotch wife, established a mercantile business in Boston, and died at Concord in 1801. John Thoreau, who at the time of which I speak was thirty-six years old, had begun life as a merchant, but having failed in business and lost whatever property he inherited from his father, he had

recently turned his attention to pencil-making, a trade which had been introduced into Concord some ten or twelve years earlier, from which he not only derived a competent livelihood, but gained distinction by the excellence of his workmanship. He is described by those who knew him as a small, quiet, plodding, unobtrusive man, occupying himself for the most part in his own business, though he could be friendly and sociable when occasion invited. His wife, on the other hand, whose maiden name was Cynthia Dunbar,¹ was wholly different in character, being remarkable, like the other members of her family, for her shrewd keen humour and intellectual sprightliness; she was tall, handsome, quick-witted; fond of dress and fond of gossip, though kindly and affectionate at heart; she had a good voice and sang well, and often monopolised the conversation by her unfailing flow of talk.

Henry David Thoreau, the third child of these parents, was born at Concord 12th July 1817, in a quaint, old-fashioned house on the Virginia Road, surrounded by pleasant orchards and peat-meadows, and close to an extensive tract known as "Bedford levels." In this house, the home of his grandmother, Mrs. Minott, he lived for eight months, then for another period of the same length in a

¹ Her father, Mr. Asa Dunbar of Keene, New Hampshire, died in 1787, and his widow afterwards married a Concord farmer named Minott.

house on the Lexington Road, on the outskirts of the village. In 1818 his parents left Concord for five years, and lived first at Chelmsford, a town ten miles distant, and afterwards at Boston, where Henry first went to school. But as their business did not prosper in either place, the family returned in 1823 to Concord, which thenceforth continued to be their home. They little thought, however, that the name of Concord and the name of Thoreau were destined in later years to be so intimately and inseparably associated.

This village of Concord, which lies twenty miles to the north-west of Boston, and must be distinguished from the capital of New Hampshire, which bears the same name, was at the time of Henry Thoreau's boyhood the centre of a scattered township of about two thousand inhabitants. Under the name of Musketaquid it had been an ancient settlement of the Indians, its attraction, in earlier as in later ages, consisting in the rich meadows which border the Musketaquid, or "Grass-ground" river. "When I walk in the fields of Concord," so Thoreau afterwards wrote in his diary, "I forget that this which is now Concord was once Musketaquid. Everywhere in the fields, in the corn and grain land, the earth is strewn with the relics of a race which has vanished as completely as if trodden in with the earth. Wherever I go I tread in the tracks of the Indian." In 1635 the district was purchased from the Indians by the Massa-

chusetts colony, which there made its first inland plantation; and it was from the peaceful settlement then effected that the place received its name of Concord. At the beginning of the present century Concord, though not yet associated with any of the great literary names which have since made it famous, was not unknown to the world; for there, in 1775, had been struck the first blow for American independence, when the English troops, after some desultory fighting, were repulsed by the "rebel" farmers. Lafayette visited Concord in 1824, and the following year, half a century after the battle, there was a celebration of that event, at which Henry Thoreau, then a child of seven, is said to have been present.

The inhabitants of Concord were mostly agriculturists,—sturdy farmers, living in comfortable old-fashioned homesteads; but there was a considerable sprinkling also of mechanics and men of business; and as the town lay on the high-road between the uplands of New Hampshire and the port of Boston, it was to some extent a centre of trade; it was also at that time one of the places appointed for the holding of the county assizes. A frank and natural equality was one of the traditional characteristics of Concord society, extreme wealth and extreme poverty being alike rare; so that its citizens, a plain and frugal folk, quite unostentatious in their manners and mode of life, yet prizing literature and learning, were saved

from the evils of either luxury or destitution ; while the well-known Concord families—the Hosmers and Barretts and Heywoods—preserved and handed on from generation to generation their sterling hereditary qualities. The two leading personages at Concord at the time of Henry Thoreau's birth, and for many years afterwards, were Dr. Ripley, the Unitarian pastor of the village, who lived in the "old Manse" which Hawthorne subsequently inhabited, and Samuel Hoar, a man of senatorial rank, who exemplified in his character some of the best New England qualities of dignity, justice, and simplicity. Dr. Ripley, quaint, humorous, and patriarchal, was minister at Concord for over half a century, and was regarded by his parishioners as a friend and teacher to whom they could look for advice and assistance in all matters that concerned them, temporal no less than spiritual. Henry Thoreau was one of the many Concord children who had been baptized by him into the Unitarian Church, and in whose welfare the kindly pastor continued to take an affectionate interest.

The dominant features of the natural scenery of Concord are its waters and its woods ; it is described by Ellery Channing as "a village surrounded by tracts of woodland and meadows, abounding in convenient yet retired paths for walking." The two rivers of Concord, the slow-flowing Musketaquid and the swifter Assabet, which meet close to the north of the village, have

been immortalised both by Hawthorne and Thoreau. "The sluggish artery of the Concord meadows," says the latter, "steals thus unobserved through the town, without a murmur or a pulse-beat, its general course from south-west to north-east, and its length about fifty miles; a huge volume of matter, ceaselessly rolling through the plains and valleys of the substantial earth, with the mocassined tread of an Indian warrior, making haste from the high places of the earth to its ancient reservoir."¹ As for the Assabet, we have it on Hawthorne's authority that "a lovelier stream than this, for a mile above its junction with the Concord, never flowed on earth—nowhere, indeed, except to lave the interior regions of a poet's imagination." In addition to its rivers, Concord is also well provided with ponds, of which Walden, Sandy Pond, and White Pond to the south of the village, and Bateman's Pond to the north, are the most considerable; moreover, after the heavy rains, which are usual at two periods of the year, the lowlands adjacent to the river are converted by the floods into a chain of shallow lakes; so that it has been remarked that there is no portion of the township of Concord which is not more or less in proximity to some lake or stream.

And if well watered, Concord is also well wooded, its plain sandy soil being covered in almost every direction by thick groves of oak, pine, chestnut,

¹ Introduction to the *Week*. Compare Hawthorne's account in *Mosses from an Old Manse*.

maple, and other forest trees, which even to this day retain much of their primeval severity. "I saw nothing wilder," wrote a recent visitor to Concord,¹ "among the unbroken solitudes of the Upper Ottawa tributaries than these woods that fringe the bank of Walden. Not a human habitation, not a cleared farm, not a sign of life or civilised occupation anywhere broke the unvaried expanse of wild woodland." The hills which surround Concord—Anursack, Nashawtuck, Ball's Hill, Brister's Hill, and the rest—are of no great height; but they command fine prospects, westward and northward, in the direction of loftier ranges—Wachusett, Monadnock, and the White Mountains of New Hampshire. "The scenery of Concord," says Nathaniel Hawthorne, "has no very marked characteristics, but has a great deal of quiet beauty in keeping with the river. There are broad and peaceful meadows, which, I think, are among the most satisfying objects in natural scenery. The hills which border these meadows are wide swells of land, or long and gradual ridges, some of them densely covered with wood. The white village appears to be embosomed among wooded hills." The centre of the village, which is mainly on one side of the river, is a large open square, with fine elms, and a white wooden church.

"Thoreau's country," says a recent writer,²

¹ Grant Allen, in *Fortnightly Review*, May 1888.

² "A. L." in an American journal.

“has the broad effects and simple elements that ‘compose’ well in the best landscape art. It is a quiet bit of country that under the seeing eye can be made to yield a store of happiness. Its resources for the naturalist, at first scarcely suspected, are practically inexhaustible. It is not tame, as an English landscape is tame. It keeps its memories and traditions of the red man along with his flint-flakes and arrow-heads, and its birds and wild-flowers are varied and abundant. A country of noble trees, wide meadow-expanses—and the little river, quiet almost to stagnation, with just current enough to keep it pure, in places much grown up to water-weed, in other places thick strewn with lily-pads, the banks umbrageous and grassy, fringed with ferns and wild-flowers, and here and there jutting into a point of rocks, or expanding into placid lake-like stretches—these are the main elements of Thoreau’s country. Then we must add a clean, sandy soil, through which water percolates with great rapidity, leaving paths pleasant to the feet. Then come the low ranges of hills, the marshes, the ponds, and the forests, fit home for a rich varied wild flora. And then the weather influences must be taken into account. This small district of country, though it feels the breath of the sea twenty miles away, is still somewhat sheltered from the asperities of the east wind. The summer nights are cool and refreshing, though the day may have a heart of fire, and the autumn

has stretches of bright, cool, resplendent weather. Owing to the dry soil, the ways seem more open and cheery in winter than in other places, and the roads are good for walking all the year round."

Among such scenes and surroundings did Henry Thoreau grow up and receive his earliest impressions of nature and society. From the first he was inured to a hardy outdoor life, driving his mother's cow to pasture when he was a child of six, and going bare-foot like the other village boys. School games and athletic sports formed no part of his youthful amusements, but at as early an age as ten or twelve, after the habit of New England boys, he was permitted to shoulder a fowling-piece or fishing-rod and betake himself to the wildest and most solitary recesses of wood or river, to which practice he was in some measure indebted for his close intimacy with nature. The water-side seems to have had a special fascination for him at an early date, one of his childish reminiscences being a visit to Walden Pond, which excited a desire in him to live there, and as he grew older he was fond of bathing and boating on the Concord river in company with his schoolmates, making himself acquainted with all the rocks and soundings of that placid stream. Now and then the news would spread like wildfire that a canal-boat, laden with lime, or bricks, or iron-ore, was gliding mysteriously along the river, and the village children would eagerly flock out to gaze with wonder on these "fabulous river-men," who came and went so unaccountably.

Still more interesting were the annual visits of the remnants of some Indian tribes, who used to pitch their tents in the rich meadows which had belonged of old to their forefathers, and there string their beads and weave their baskets, or initiate the Concord youths into the art of paddling an Indian canoe.

We are surprised to learn that, as a child, Henry Thoreau was afraid of thunderstorms, and at such times would creep to his father for protection; for most of the anecdotes related of his school-days are indicative of the fearlessness, self-reliance, and laconic brevity of speech for which he was afterwards conspicuous. At the age of three years he was informed that, like the godly men of whom he read in his religious exercise-book, he too would some day have to die; he received the news with equanimity, asserting, however, that he "did not want to go to heaven, because he could not carry his sled with him, for the boys said it was not shod with iron, and therefore not worth a cent"—a characteristic renouncement of a paradise in which, as he surmised, outer appearances would be unduly regarded. When charged with taking a knife belonging to another boy he replied briefly, "I did not take it"; and steadily refused to exculpate himself by further explanation until after the true offender was discovered. All being made clear, the natural inquiry put to him was why he did not sooner explain himself. "I did not take it," was again his reply. When ten years old he carried some pet chickens for sale to a neighbour-

ing innkeeper, who, in order to return the basket promptly, took them out one by one and wrung their necks before the eyes of the boy, who let no word betray the agony of his outraged feelings. His gravity had already earned him among his school-fellows the title of "the judge"; of that vivacity of intellect which subsequently showed itself in such a marked degree in his conversation and writings there seems at this time to have been no trace, at any rate no early instance has been recorded.

Whether certain hereditary influences may be recognised in the leading features of Henry Thoreau's temperament is a point on which speculation has not been wanting. Thoreau himself, in a passage of his diary, hints playfully at a possible Scandinavian ancestry. "Perhaps I am descended from the Northman named 'Thorer, the Dog-footed.' Thorer is one of the most common names in the chronicles of the Northmen, if not the most so." "His character," says Emerson, "exhibited occasional traits drawn from his French blood, in singular combination with a very strong Saxon genius"; and other writers, following on this line, have attributed his love of wild nature, his keen native humour, and other similar qualities to the same Celtic origin—the "dash of the gray wolf that stalks through his ancestral folk-lore."¹ But, at any rate, as regards his immediate parentage, the facts do not appear to

¹ John Burroughs, *The Century*, July 1882.

warrant this conclusion. The sharp contrast of character between his father and mother has already been mentioned; and it is noticeable that the vivacious tendency was here altogether on the maternal or Saxon side, while the father, in spite of his French extraction, was slow, silent, and phlegmatic. The preponderance of the maternal element in Henry's character was matter of observation and comment among his townfolk. "Of the four children of John Thoreau and Cynthia Dunbar," says Mr. Sanborn, "the two eldest, John and Helen, were said to be 'clear Thoreau,' and the others, Henry and Sophia, 'clear Dunbar'"; but he adds that the Thoreau traits were marked in Henry also. It seems, therefore, that in the present case there is no definite ground for positive assertion on this interesting but unreliable subject of hereditary genius. "I remember well," says Mr. Moncure Conway, "the stolid, taciturn pencil-maker, his father, and his simple mother, and long ago came to the conclusion that the great Thoreau was what the Buddha would call a 'twice-born' man."¹

It is, however, less open to question that the boy's character was favourably influenced and stimulated by the free, healthy atmosphere of Concord in general, and of his parents' household in particular.

¹ Thoreau's French extraction is apt to be misleading, for he was by birth and temperament a complete New Englander, and prided himself on being "autochthonous" at Concord. It is an error to pronounce the name as a French one.

It is true that no special moral earnestness was manifested by either his father or mother, the former being usually absorbed in the management of his business, while the latter, with her sister, Louisa Dunbar, and three sisters-in-law, Sarah, Maria, and Jane Thoreau, was apt to devote her energies—so Mr. Sanborn tells us—to the bickerings of the village gossip-mongers. In Mrs. Thoreau's brother, Charles Dunbar, the ready wit, characteristic of the Dunbar family, had run to the extreme of eccentricity; he led a strange vagabond life, roving about from town to town, and winning a pot-house notoriety by his waggish speeches and dexterity in certain feats of wrestling and legerdemain. But the younger members of the Thoreau household were all possessed of an unusual strength of will and seriousness of purpose; and Mrs. Thoreau herself entered with such zeal into the agitation for the abolition of slavery, when that question began to be debated in Massachusetts, as to be willing to make her house at Concord a rendezvous for abolitionist conspirators. The singular tenacity of Henry Thoreau's character, even in childhood, has already been noted. Both his sister Helen and his brother John, who were his elders by five and three years respectively, were earnest and lovable natures; so too was his younger sister Sophia; and it has been remarked by a friend who at a later time was domiciled in the family, that they each possessed a distinctive and unmistakable personality, so that "to meet one of the Thoreaus

was not the same as to encounter any other person who might happen to cross your path.”¹ At this period, when new ideas were permeating American society and preparing men’s minds for the great intellectual and social awakening that was shortly to follow, the Thoreaus had won general respect among their neighbours at Concord by their humanity, thoughtfulness, and unaffected simplicity of living.

In 1833, when sixteen years old, Henry Thoreau was sent to Harvard University,² where he occupied a room in Hollis Hall, in which, if we may trust a chance reference in one of his volumes, he experienced the inconvenience of “many and noisy neighbours, and a residence in the fourth storey.” He had been prepared for college at the Concord “Academy,” an excellent school famous for its successful teaching of Greek, where he had already exhibited a strong partiality for the classics, though his reading was not confined to the prescribed course, but began to embrace a considerable extent of English literature. His expenses at Harvard were a serious matter in a family whose means were very limited; the difficulty, however, was surmounted partly by his own carefulness and economy, partly by the help of his aunts and his elder sister, herself a school-teacher at this time. During the college vacations

¹ F. B. Sanborn.

² His name is entered in the Harvard register as David Henry Thoreau.

he took pupils, or assisted in school-teaching in several country towns, one of these engagements being at Canton, near Boston, where in 1835, his "sophomore year," he boarded and studied German with a minister named Brownson, at the same time teaching in Mr. Brownson's school. Meantime his interests at Harvard were being promoted by no less distinguished a patron than Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in 1834 had gone to live at Concord, where his forefathers had held the ministry for generations. Emerson presumably was informed by Dr. Ripley, with whom he was staying, of the promise shown by Henry Thoreau, and it seems to have been due to his good offices that the young man received some small pecuniary assistance from the beneficiary funds of the college. Thoreau's Harvard career, however, was somewhat disappointing to his relatives and friends, for perhaps owing in some degree to an illness which interrupted his studies in his senior year, and probably still more to his naturally independent temper and consequent impatience of routine, he gained no distinction when he graduated in August 1837. He is said to have refused to take his degree on the ground that five dollars was too high a price to pay for that honour.

We are fortunate in having a graphic account of Thoreau's personal appearance and mode of life at Harvard from the pen of one of his class-mates.¹

¹ Rev. John Weiss, *Christian Examiner*, Boston, July 1865.

It seems that he passed for nothing among his companions, taking little share in their studies and amusements, shunning their oyster suppers and wine parties, and mysteriously disappearing from the scene when, as occasionally happened, the course of college discipline was temporarily interrupted by a "rebellion."

"He was cold and unimpressible. The touch of his hand was moist and indifferent, as if he had taken up something when he saw your hand coming, and caught your grasp upon it. How the prominent gray-blue eyes seemed to rove down the path, just in advance of his feet, as his grave Indian stride carried him down to University Hall. He did not care for people; his classmates seemed very remote. This reverie hung always about him, and not so loosely as the odd garments which the pious household care furnished. Thought had not yet awakened his countenance; it was serene, but rather dull, rather plodding. The lips were not yet firm; there was almost a look of smug satisfaction lurking round their corners. It is plain now that he was preparing to hold his future views with great setness and personal appreciation of their importance. The nose was prominent, but its curve fell forward without firmness over the upper lip, and we remember him as looking very much like some Egyptian sculptures of faces, large-featured, but brooding, immobile, fixed in a mystic egoism. Yet his eyes were sometimes searching as if he had dropped, or expected to find, something. In fact his eyes seldom left the ground, even in his most earnest conversations with you. . . .

"He would smile to hear the word 'collegiate career' applied to the reserve and inaptness of his college life. He was not signalled by the plentiful distribution of the parts and honours which fall to the successful student. Of his private tastes there is little of consequence to recall, excepting that he was devoted to the old English literature, and had a good many volumes of the poetry from Gower and Chaucer down through the era of Elizabeth. In this mine he worked with a quiet enthusiasm."

These traits of aloofness and self-seclusion are attributed by his class-mate, not to any conceit or superciliousness, still less to shyness, but to a sort of homely "complacency," which, though quite natural and inevitable, had the effect of putting him out of sympathy with his surroundings at Harvard. His complacency was "perfectly satisfied with its own ungraciousness, because that was essential to its private business." This determined concentration on his own life-course was, as we shall see, very characteristic of Thoreau in his mature career, and it is interesting to find that it was thus early developed.

"In college Thoreau had made no great impression," says another of his contemporaries;¹ "he was far from being distinguished as a scholar, was not known to have any literary tastes, was never a contributor to the college periodical, *Harvardiana*; he was not conspicuous in any of the literary or scientific societies of the undergraduates, and withal was of an unsocial disposition, and kept himself very much aloof from his class-mates. At the time we graduated, I doubt whether any of his acquaintances regarded him as giving promise of future distinction." We further learn from a letter addressed to Emerson by the president of Harvard University that Thoreau had failed to make a more favourable impression on his teachers than on his class-mates,

¹ The Rev. D. G. Haskins, in his *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston, 1887.

since he "had imbibed some notions concerning emulation and college rank which had a natural tendency to diminish his zeal, if not his exertions." We can well believe that his strong individualist tendencies had even now begun to manifest themselves; indeed it is apparent from his youthful "themes," parts of which have been quoted by Mr. Sanborn, that he was already a fearless thinker and questioner on various matters, social and religious—a quality which would not be likely to conciliate the good opinion of the college authorities. "Education," he has somewhere remarked, "often makes a straight-cut ditch out of a free meandering brook"; and this he was determined to avoid in his own case. His integrity, however, and high moral principle were clearly recognised; and from the first he seems to have practised a simple and abstemious mode of living. "He had been so wisely nourished at the collegiate fount," says Channing, "as to come forth undissipated, not digging his grave in tobacco and coffee—those two perfect causes of paralysis." Thoreau has himself stated that he never smoked anything more noxious than dried lily-stems, from which indulgence he had a faint recollection of deriving pleasure before he was a man.

The view which Thoreau himself expressed of Harvard College and its educational system is interesting in this connection. In his *Walden*, a volume which is more particularly addressed to

"poor students," he advocates under the heading of "economy" the introduction of a simpler life and more practical self-help into the Cambridge curriculum. "Those conveniences," he says, "which the student requires at Cambridge or elsewhere, cost him or somebody else ten times as great a sacrifice of life as they would with proper management on both sides. Those things for which the most money is demanded are never the things which the student most wants. Tuition, for instance, is an important item in the term bill, while for the far more valuable education which he gets by associating with the most cultivated of his contemporaries no charge is made. . . . How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? If I wished a boy to know something about the arts and sciences, I would not pursue the common course, which is merely to send him into the neighbourhood of some professor, where anything is professed and practised but the art of life. . . . To my astonishment I was informed on leaving college that I had studied navigation! Why, if I had taken one turn down the harbour I should have known more about it."

Emerson says that Thoreau's debt to College was important; but this is a statement which it will be prudent to accept with some reservation. It is true that although not "successful," in the ordinary sense of the word, he had become a good

classical scholar, and had derived intellectual benefit from the teaching of at least one of the lecturers, Professor Channing, whose nephew, Ellery Channing, afterwards became his most intimate friend. He himself says in a letter of 1843 that what he learned in College was chiefly "to express himself," and this, in his case, was certainly no unimportant gift. But, on the whole, we shall probably be safe in concluding that the advantages which Thoreau obtained from his college career were mainly of that indirect kind to which he refers in the passage above quoted, and that he profited far less by the actual instruction there given him than by the opportunities afforded for wide reading and self-culture. Meantime his love of outdoor life and open-air pursuits had in no wise diminished during his residence at Harvard; on the contrary, he was as diligent a student of natural history as of rhetoric or mathematics, and felt as much veneration for Indian relics as for Greek classics. It is stated that Thoreau's first experiment in camping-out took place during his senior year at college, when he made an excursion of this sort to Lincoln Pond, a few miles from Walden. On this occasion his companion was Stearns Wheeler, one of his school-mates both at Concord and Harvard, whose early death in 1843 is lamented in Thoreau's letters.

But undoubtedly it was in his conception of ethical principles, in close conjunction with a kind of mystic nature-worship, that he had made the

greatest progress towards maturity of thought. We are told that he resolved at an early period of his life, probably during his college career, "to read no book, take no walk, undertake no enterprise, but such as he could endure to give an account of to himself; and live thus deliberately for the most part." When only seventeen he had become convinced of the utility of "keeping a private journal or record of thoughts, feelings, studies, and daily experience," with a view to "settling accounts with one's mind"—an introspective tendency which grew stronger and stronger with increasing years. Already, too, his intense ideality of temperament was clearly developing itself; while still a boy he had written that "the principle which prompts us to pay an involuntary homage to the infinite, the incomprehensible, the sublime, forms the very basis of our religion." It was his delight, he tells us, to monopolise a little Gothic window overlooking the garden at the back of his father's house, which stood on the main street of Concord village, and there, especially on quiet Sunday afternoons, to muse in undisturbed reverie. "Then did I use," he says, "with eyes upturned, to gaze upon the clouds, and, allowing my imagination to wander, search for flaws in their rich drapery, that I might get a peep at that world beyond, which they seem intended to veil from our view." Often in the early dawn he would stroll with his brother John, to whom he was devotedly attached, to the "Cliffs,"

a rocky ridge which overhangs the river Concord where, a couple of miles above the village, it swells into Fairhaven Bay; and there, seated on the summit, "catch the first ray of the morning sun, as it gleamed upon the smooth, still river, wandering in sullen silence far below."

His devotion to Concord was already a fixed and unalterable sentiment, which sometimes exhibited him in a softer and more emotional mood than was customary to his stern self-repressed nature. While he was still at college he happened one day to ask his mother what profession she would advise him to choose. She replied that he could buckle on his knapsack and roam abroad to seek his fortune in the world. The tears rose to his eyes at this suggestion, and his sister Helen, who was standing by, tenderly put her arm round him, and said—"No, Henry, you shall not go; you shall stay at home and live with us." So fully were these words verified that twenty years later we find him still living at Concord, and writing to one of his friends that he had "a real genius for staying at home."

CHAPTER II

EARLY MANHOOD

WHEN Thoreau left the University he was just twenty years old, and the first question which occupied his mind was naturally the choice of a profession by which he might gain his living. Like the other members of his family he became a teacher, an occupation of which he had, as we have seen, already made trial during his vacations at college. In the spring of 1838 he went on a visit to Maine, where his mother had relatives, on the look-out for some educational appointment, bearing with him testimonials signed by Dr. Ripley, R. W. Emerson, and the President of Harvard University, all of whom spoke in the highest terms of his intellectual power and good moral character. He seems, however, to have been unsuccessful in this particular quest; for in the same year we find him engaged with his brother in keeping the "Academy" at Concord, the private school for boys and girls at which he himself had been educated, and which had been established

about twenty years before by some of the leading Concord citizens. How long Thoreau held this post is not precisely recorded, but it is evident that he did not find his tutorial position at all congenial to his tastes; indeed, it is difficult nowadays to conceive of this uncompromising champion of individuality discharging the functions of school-teacher under the supervision of a visiting committee.

"I have thoroughly tried school-keeping," he says in *Walden*, "and found that my expenses were in proportion, or rather out of proportion, to my income, for I was obliged to dress and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly, and I lost my time into the bargain. As I did not teach for the good of my fellow-men, but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure."

If we may trust the humorous account given by Ellery Channing of Thoreau's pedagogic experiences, the immediate cause of the resignation of his office was the question of corporal punishment. He at first announced that he should not flog, but should substitute the punishment of "talking morals" to his pupils; but after a time one of the School Committee remonstrated against this novel system, and protested that the welfare of the school was being endangered by the undue leniency of its master. Mr. Thoreau must use the ferule, or the school would spoil. "So he did," says Channing, "by feruling six of his pupils after school, one of whom was the maid-servant in his own house. But

it did not suit well with his conscience, and he reported to the Committee that he should no longer keep their school, as they interfered with his arrangements." School-keeping seems to have been practised by Thoreau for about two years in all; then, as more congenial subjects occupied his attention, he gave it up altogether, and betook himself to his fore-ordained and inevitable profession—the study of nature. "He soon began," says Channing, "to serve the mistress to whom he was afterwards bound, and to sing the immunity of Pan." The ferule of the schoolmaster was laid by for the herbarium and spy-glass of the poet-naturalist.

This brings us to the mention of a movement which was gathering force in New England during Thoreau's youth and early manhood, and had a marked influence on the whole development of his character. Transcendentalism,¹ which originated in the philosophy of Kant, and was revived by Coleridge and Carlyle in England, had now begun to be a disturbing and regenerating power in American sociology, and to find its chief exponents in such men as George Ripley, Alcott, and Emerson; though there had long before been a vein of native transcendentalist doctrine in the quietism and quakerism of Penn, John Woolman, and others. The transcendentalism of New England was simply

¹ *I.e.* The study of the pure reason which *transcends* the finite senses; the "feeling of the infinite," as Emerson expressed it.

a fresh outburst of ideal philosophy ; it was a renaissance in religion, morals, art, and politics ; a period of spiritual questioning and awakening. "The transcendental movement," says Lowell, "was the protestant spirit of Puritanism seeking a new outlet and an escape from forms and creeds which compressed rather than expressed it." The "apostles of the newness," or "realists," as the transcendentalists were variously styled, aimed at a return from conventionality to nature, from artifice to simplicity ; they held that every one should not only think for himself, but should labour with his own hands ; and the exaltation of the individual, as opposed to the State and the territorial immensity of America, was one of their most cherished purposes.

It was not to be expected that this transcendentalist revival, which by its very nature was vague, misty, and ill-defined, would be exempt from the extravagances and absurdities which almost inevitably accompany such a movement. "Everybody," says Mr. Lowell, "had a mission (with a capital M) to attend to everybody else's business. No brain but had its private maggot, which must have found pitifully short commons sometimes. Not a few impecunious zealots abjured the use of money (unless earned by other people), professing to live on the internal revenues of the spirit. Some had an assurance of instant millennium so soon as hooks and eyes should be substituted for buttons. Communities were established where everything was to

be common but common sense. The word 'transcendental' then was the maid-of-all-work for those who could not think, as pre-Raphaelite has been more recently for people of the same limited house-keeping."¹ But if certain members of the transcendentalist party were deservedly the butt for a good deal of ridicule, the main purpose of the movement was too important to be laughed down, and fully justified itself in the light of subsequent events. Originating in the meetings of a few friends, of whom Emerson was one, at George Ripley's house in Boston, this New England transcendentalism proved to be one of the most powerful forces in American literature and politics.

Concord, where Thoreau was born and bred, became, as we shall see, the very heart and centre of the transcendental movement, which aimed at carrying its doctrines into every branch of social life; it is not surprising, therefore, that a mind already naturally predisposed to idealism should have been strongly affected by the congenial gospel of an inner intellectual awakening. Witness his own verses on "Inspiration," which admirably express that conception of a spiritual renascence which was the essence of the new ideas:—

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"I hearing ~~yet~~ who had but ears,
And sight who had but eyes before,
I moments live who lived but years,
And truth discern who knew but learning's lore.

¹ Essay on Thoreau in *My Study Windows*.

" I hear beyond the range of sound,
I see beyond the range of sight,
New earths and skies and seas around,
And in my day the sun doth pale his light.

" I will not doubt for ever more,
Nor falter from a steadfast faith,
For though the system be turned o'er
God takes not back the word which once he saith."

His diaries and early letters are full of this transcendental manner and tone ; and it was doubtless in great part owing to the same influence that he felt so marked a disinclination to settle down in the ordinary groove of professional business.

It was not only school-keeping that was given up by Thoreau, under the stress of this new faith. In 1838, or thereabouts, while he was still a school teacher, he had quietly but definitely seceded from Dr. Ripley's congregation, to the grief and disappointment, it must be feared, of the venerable pastor, who looked with suspicion and alarm on the gospel of the transcendentalists, which he saw promulgated all around him towards the close of his long career. The youthful secessionist had moreover run the risk of imprisonment by his refusal to pay the church-tax, on the ground that he did not see why the schoolmaster should support the priest more than the priest the schoolmaster. The difficulty was finally settled by his signing a statement in which he testified that he was not a member of any congregational body. That so fearless and independent

a thinker as Thoreau should maintain his adherence to any religious formula was not to be expected, for the very reason that the natural piety of his mind was so simple and sincere. "With by far the greater part of mankind," he wrote in an early essay of 1837, "religion is a habit; or rather habit is religion. However paradoxical it may seem, it appears to me that to reject 'religion' is the first step towards moral excellence; at least no man ever attained to the highest degree of the latter by any other road." If a name be sought for the faith which Thoreau henceforth held and practised, he should probably be styled a pantheist. Never was there a more passionately devout worshipper of the beauty and holiness of Life, and it was on this instinctive belief in the eternal goodness of Nature that he based the optimistic creed which we shall find to be the central point of his philosophy. "Formerly," he wrote, "methought Nature developed as I developed, and grew up with me. My life was ecstasy. In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive and inhabited my body with inexpressible satisfaction; both its weariness and refreshment were sweet to me. This earth was the most glorious musical instrument, and I was audience to its strains. I said to myself, I said to others, there comes into my mind such an indescribable, infinite, all-absorbing, divine, heavenly pleasure; a sense of salvation and expansion. And I have naught to do with it; I perceive that I am dealt with by

superior powers. By all manner of bounds and traps threatening the extreme penalty of the divine law, it behoves us to preserve the purity and sanctity of the mind. That I am innocent to myself, that I love and reverence my life."

School-keeping being abandoned, the question of a profession, it may well be supposed, was still pressed on the youthful enthusiast by anxious relatives and friends. As we have already seen, pencil-making was the regular employment of the Thoreau family, and Henry, like his father, had acquired much skill in this handicraft, to which, for a time at any rate, he applied himself with great assiduity. The story goes that when he had entirely mastered the secrets of the trade, had obtained certificates from the recognised connoisseurs in Boston of the excellence of his workmanship, and was being congratulated by his friends on having now secured his way to fortune—he suddenly declared his intention of making not another pencil, since "he would not do again what he had done once." True or not, the anecdote is happily characteristic of Thoreau's whimsical manner of expressing his most serious convictions. To regard him, as some have done, as a mere idler and pleasure-seeker is to misunderstand him completely; he was, as Emerson has testified, "a very industrious man, and setting, like all highly organised men, a high value on his time, he seemed the only man of leisure in town." He had early discovered, by virtue of that keen insight which

looked through the outer husk of conventionality, that what is called "profit" in the bustle of commercial life is often far from being, in the true sense, profitable; that the just claims of leisure are fully as important as the just claims of business; and that the surest way of becoming rich is to need little—in his own words, "a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone." "I have tried trade," he wrote in *Walden*, "but I found that it would take ten years to get under way in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to the devil." This being so, why should he, at the outset of his career, pledge himself irrevocably, after the manner of young men, to some professional treadmill, and for the sake of imaginary "comforts" sacrifice the substantial happiness of life? That he made this resolve in no spirit of selfishness or thoughtless self-sufficiency, nay, that he even winced at times under the reproachful comments of his townsfolk, is shown by an entry in his diary in 1842. "I must confess that I have felt mean enough when asked how I was to act on society, what errand I had to mankind. Undoubtedly I did not feel mean without a reason, and yet my loitering is not without a defence. I would fain communicate the wealth of my life to men, would really give them what is most precious in my gift. I know no riches I would keep back. I have no private good, unless it be my peculiar ability to serve the public. This is the only individual property." "No, no," he exclaims, at a

later period, in reply to a well-meant suggestion that, being without a definite profession, he should engage in some commercial enterprise ; " I am not without employment at this stage of the voyage. To tell the truth, I saw an advertisement for able-bodied seamen, when I was a boy, sauntering in my native port, and as soon as I came of age, I embarked." This enterprise was none other than the study of wild nature ; his " business " was to be a professional walker or " saunterer," as he called it ; to spend at least one half of each day in the open air ; to watch the dawns and the sunsets ; to carry express what was in the wind ; to secure the latest news from forest and hill-top, and to be " self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms." These duties he subsequently declared that he had faithfully and regularly performed ; if his friends were disappointed, he at least was not. Witness his own lines :

" Great God, I ask thee for no meaner pelf
Than that I may not disappoint myself,
That in my action I may soar as high
As I can now discern with this clear eye.

" And next in value, which thy kindness lends,
That I may greatly disappoint my friends,
Howe'er they think or hope that it may be,
They may not dream how thou'st distinguished me."

Idleness, however, formed no part of Thoreau's "loitering" ; he was not one who would permit himself to be dependent on the labour of others ; for he

was well aware that one of the most significant questions as to a man's life is "how he gets his living, what proportion of his daily bread he earns by day labour or job work with his pen, what he inherits, what steals." Apart from the chosen occupation of his lifetime, to which he devoted himself with unflagging industry and zeal, he conscientiously supported himself by such occasional labour as his position required, toiling from time to time (to quote an illustration which he was fond of using) like Apollo in the service of Admetus. During the first ten years of his mature life, that is from 1837 to 1847, he earned what little he needed chiefly by manual work, his remarkable mechanical skill enabling him to do this with readiness. "Never idle or indulgent," says Emerson, "he preferred, when he wanted money, earning it by some piece of manual labour agreeable to him, as building a boat or a fence, planting, grafting, surveying, or other short work, to any long engagements. With his hardy habits and few wants, his skill in wood-craft, and his powerful arithmetic, he was very competent to live in any part of the world." His efficiency in the family business of pencil-making has already been mentioned ; at this trade, in spite of his reported youthful abjuration, he worked at intervals during the greater portion of his life, chiefly by way of rendering aid to his father and sisters. Land-surveying was another employment in which he gradually and incidentally busied himself ; and here too,

owing to his natural adroitness in mensuration, and his intimate acquaintance with the Concord hill-sides and "wood-lots," his services were highly appreciated.

He also began at this time, though but slightly and tentatively at first, to give his attention to lecturing and literary work. His first lecture, the subject of which was "Society," was delivered in April 1838, at the Concord "Lyceum," where he afterwards lectured almost every year during the remainder of his life. His earliest poems were composed about 1837. While in residence at Harvard University he had been a constant reader of verse, had mastered Chalmers' Collection, and become acquainted with a quaint and old-fashioned school of poetry little known to his neighbours and contemporaries. The influence of Herbert, who was one of his early favourites, is very discernible in Thoreau's youthful poems, and Cowley and Donne were most attentively studied by him, Quarles also at a somewhat later period. One of the most remarkable of these early poems is the piece entitled "Sic Vita," of which the first stanza runs thus :

"I am a parcel of vain strivings, tied
By a chance bond together,
Dangling this way and that, their links
Were made so loose and wide,
Methinks
For milder weather."

This poem was written on a strip of paper which

bound together a bunch of violets, and so thrown in by Thoreau at the window of Mrs. Brown, of Plymouth, a lady with whom he corresponded, and who was the means, as will be related, of his being introduced to Emerson. Some of his other early poems, noticeable for their autobiographical interest, will presently be mentioned. In September 1841 he wrote to a friend: "Just now I am in the mid-sea of verses, and they actually rustle round me, as the leaves would round the head of Autumnus himself, should he thrust it up through some vales which I know; but, alas, many of them are but crisped and yellow leaves like his, I fear, and will deserve no better fate than to make mould for new harvests." In accordance with this feeling, and prompted, it is said, by Emerson's advice, Thoreau subsequently destroyed most of these youthful poems, and after the age of thirty he seldom wrote anything but prose. His early college "themes" have already been mentioned; and in 1837 a strong stimulus was given to his prose writing by the commencement of a regular series of diaries, the first of which, the *Red Journal*, ran on to some six hundred long pages in less than three years. Here he systematically noted his daily walks, adventures, and meditations, so that the journal became, as Channing remarks, "an autobiography with the genuine brand—it is unconscious." "For a long time," says Thoreau, in playful allusion to this private record, "I was reporter to a journal, of no very wide circu-

lation, whose editor has never yet seen fit to print the bulk of my contributions, and as is too common with writers, I got only my labour for my pains. However, in this case my pains were their own reward." As the diary was revised and corrected with considerable minuteness, its author was able to draw direct from this literary store, whenever he needed the materials for a poem or essay. This was the case with his contributions to the *Dial*, when that transcendentalist organ was started in 1840 by certain of Thoreau's friends.

The effect of the transcendental movement on the formation of Thoreau's character and the bent of his opinions has already been noted. During this same period of his early manhood, probably while he was still a school-teacher, there occurred an incident which must have affected him very deeply at the time, and may perhaps furnish a key to a good deal that is otherwise rather inexplicable in the tone of some of his writings. It is said that he fell in love with a girl to whom his brother was also attached (she was the daughter of a country pastor), and that in a rare spirit of self-sacrifice he declined to press his own claims, so as to avoid placing himself in any rivalry with his brother. Though there appears to be no actual record of the facts, the story is related on the authority of Emerson, Alcott, and other friends who were in a position to know the truth, and is corroborated by one or two allusions in Thoreau's

writings. The elegiac stanzas on "Sympathy" are understood to refer to this subject, the "gentle boy" whose beauty is therein commemorated being in fact a gentle girl.

"Lately, alas! I knew a gentle boy
Whose features all were cast in Virtue's mould,
As one she had designed for Beauty's toy,
But after manned him for her own stronghold.

"So was I taken unawares by this,
I quite forgot my homage to confess;
Yet now am forced to know, though hard it is,
I might have loved him, had I loved him less.

"Each moment as we nearer drew to each,
A stern respect withheld us further yet,
So that we seemed beyond each other's reach,
And less acquainted than when first we met.

"Eternity may not the chance repeat;
But I must tread my single way alone,
In sad remembrance that we once did meet,
And know that bliss irrevocably gone."¹

It may be further surmised that the same incident is alluded to in an otherwise unintelligible entry in Thoreau's diary for 26th January 1841.² "I had a dream last night which had reference to an act in my life in which I had been most disinterested and true to my highest instinct, but completely failed in realising my hopes; and now, after so many months, in the stillness of sleep, complete justice

¹ The *Dial*, vol. i. No. 1. The lines "To the Maiden in the East," also printed in the *Dial*, do not refer to the same person.

² *Winter*, p. 253.

was rendered me. It was a divine remuneration. In my waking hours I could not have conceived of such retribution ; the presumption of desert would have damned the whole. But now I was permitted to be not so much a subject as a partner to that retribution." To those who are acquainted with this story of Thoreau's youthful passion and self-inflicted abnegation, it becomes less difficult to understand the somewhat severe and remotely ideal tone that pervades his utterances on friendship and love. "In the light of this new fact," says Mr. R. L. Stevenson in his essay on Thoreau, "those pages, so seemingly cold, are seen to be alive with feeling." In this relation we see that there is a peculiar appropriateness in the title which Emerson first applied to Thoreau—the "Bachelor of Nature."

That Thoreau would have been willing to make any sacrifice of his personal happiness for the sake of his brother, we can well believe ; for this brother was, as he has gratefully recorded, his "good genius," a "cheerful spirit" by whose sunny presence he was ever invigorated and reassured. The two had been intimately associated from childhood, had worked together and played together, and roamed in company over all the hills and woodlands of Concord. It was with his brother John that Henry made, in 1839, that famous holiday-trip on the waters of the Concord and Merrimac rivers, an account of which was published, ten years

later, in his first volume, the *Week*. Starting from Concord on the last day of August, in their boat, the *Musketaquid*, which they had made with their own hands in the spring, and taking with them their tent, and guns, and fishing-tackle, and various provisions for the voyage, they journeyed down the slow-flowing Concord river, till they came to its confluence with the larger and swifter Merrimac at Lowell. Thence they rowed up the stream of the Merrimac, which, by comparison with that which they had left, seemed like "a silver cascade which falls all the way from the White Mountains to the sea," until they arrived within a few miles of the New Hampshire capital, which bears the same name as their native village. Here they were compelled to leave their boat, while they proceeded on foot along the bank of the narrowing stream, and so traced the Merrimac river to its source among the White Mountains. This was one of the first of the "Excursions" to which Thoreau was afterwards so much addicted, and from which he often derived benefit both in health and enlarged experiences. The boat in which the brothers made their voyage came subsequently into the possession of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and is the one referred to in the Introduction to the *Mosses from an Old Manse*.

Up to the date of which we are speaking Thoreau had no very intimate companion except his brother John, for he had made no close friend-

ships at college, such as should last him for a lifetime. One friendship, however, had already commenced, which was of extreme importance to him both in itself and as being the means of introducing him to a larger circle of friends. Emerson, as has been stated, had settled in Concord in 1834, and had at once manifested a kindly interest in the welfare of his young neighbour, fifteen years his junior, who was then studying at Harvard University. It was probably in 1837 that their first personal meeting, which could not long have been delayed, was brought about through the agency of a lady who was a relative of Emerson's family and a friend of the Thoreaus, the Mrs. Brown to whom the stanzas headed "*Sic Vita*" were dedicated by their youthful author. This lady, having been informed by Helen Thoreau that there was a passage in her brother Henry's diary which contained some ideas similar to those expressed by Emerson in a recent lecture, reported the matter to Emerson, and at his request brought Henry Thoreau to his house. Thus began an intercourse which continued unbroken during the rest of Thoreau's life, and which was productive of much pleasure and profit on both sides, to the elder man as well as to the younger. "I delight much in my young friend," wrote Emerson in 1838, "who seems to have as free and erect a mind as any I have ever met."

The value to Thoreau of this admission into the

Emersonian circle, exactly at the time when he was able to derive from it the most advantage and encouragement, can hardly be over-estimated; for not only did it draw out the latent energies of his character, but gave him an opportunity of expressing and publishing his thoughts. A periodical which should be the accredited organ of the new ideas had for some time been in contemplation among the members of the transcendental "symposium," and in 1840 this project was carried into effect by the establishment of the quarterly *Dial*, the management of which was chiefly in the hands of Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and George Ripley. Its chances of success, in the commercial sense, were from the first very precarious, for the number of original subscribers was small, and a transcendental magazine was not likely to attain to much popularity; but the *Dial* was nevertheless the means of uniting and consolidating the advocates of the new philosophy, and of affording an opening for many writers of merit who had been hitherto unknown. Commencing in July 1840, it continued to be issued for four years, the editorship during the first half of that time being entrusted to Margaret Fuller and George Ripley, while among the contributors were Emerson, Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Ripley, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Peabody, Lowell, Thoreau, Ellery Channing, Jones Very, W. H. Channing, and many others of more or less note. Each of the four volumes of the *Dial*

contained essays and poems from Thoreau's pen, his poem on "Sympathy" in the first number being his earliest appearance in print. This, however, was but his novitiate in literary authorship, and several of his papers were rejected by Margaret Fuller, during the term of her editorship, with a candid criticism of what she judged to be their crudities and defects.

The presence of Emerson at Concord, to which place he was bound by family ties and early associations—four of his ancestors having been Concord ministers and Dr. Ripley being his step-grandfather,—was an event of no slight importance in the history of that hitherto somewhat secluded township. After resigning his Unitarian pastorate at Boston in 1832, and spending the next year in England, he had married his second wife, Miss Lydia Jackson, and taken up his permanent residence at Concord in 1835, where he was so clearly recognised as its most illustrious citizen that in 1836, when a monument was erected on the site of the battlefield of 1775, he was chosen to commemorate the occasion by those stanzas which have since become so celebrated :

" By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world."

Through the rise of transcendentalism and the rapid spread of Emerson's literary fame, Concord—

such is the attraction of genius—became more and more a place of note and the resort of poets and philosophers; it was the beginning of a new era for the quiet country town whose sturdy farmers were no longer to be its most prominent representatives, but were to see their placid region invaded by a host of eager enthusiasts from every part of New England. "It was necessary to go but a little way beyond my threshold," wrote Hawthorne a few years later, "before meeting with stranger moral shapes of men than might have been encountered elsewhere in a circuit of a thousand miles. These hobgoblins of flesh and blood were attracted thither by the wide-spreading influence of a great original thinker, who had his earthly abode at the opposite extremity of our village. His mind acted upon the minds of a certain constitution with wonderful magnetism, and drew many men upon long pilgrimages to speak with him face to face. People that had lighted on a new thought, or a thought that they fancied new, came to Emerson, as the finder of a glittering gem hastens to a lapidary to ascertain its quality and value."

But of far more importance than these restless visitors was the permanent circle of friends and fellow-workers who, as old Dr. Ripley was passing away from his ministry, were gathering round the acknowledged seer of Concord. Prominent among these was Amos Bronson Alcott, who came to Con-

cord with his wife and daughters in 1840, tall, slender, white-headed,—one of the gentlest, noblest, and most lovable of men,—and highly valued by Emerson, as by all who knew him (smile though they might at his mysticism and lack of worldly prudence), for his lofty aims and disinterested zeal in the service of humanity. Two years later came Nathaniel Hawthorne, a mystic of a gloomier type, who brought his bride, Sophia Peabody, to the seclusion of the Old Manse, which had been Dr. Ripley's residence. Hawthorne's sister-in-law, the talented Elizabeth Peabody, had already settled in Concord, and Margaret Fuller, the Zenobia of his famous romance, plain, indeed, in her personal appearance as compared with that brilliant heroine, yet exercising no less marvellous fascination by her learning, genius, versatility, and rich sympathetic nature, was a frequent visitor for weeks together in the village, where her sister, Ellen Fuller, who had married Ellery Channing, the poet, was then living with her husband. Here too resided Elizabeth Hoar, another of those earnest, thoughtful women by whom the Concord society was rendered doubly remarkable.

These, with Henry Thoreau, were the chief members of that transcendentalist company of which Concord was the meeting-place, and it cannot be doubted that the course of his speculations, however stubborn his individuality, must have been appreciably affected by his early introduction into

so distinguished a group. As early as 1840 he was fully admitted into the inner circle of which Emerson, Alcott, and Margaret Fuller were the chief representatives, and used to be present at Alcott's philosophical "conversations," held at Emerson's house, which were attended by many advanced thinkers from Boston, Cambridge, and other neighbouring towns. A burlesque account (not to be too literally understood) of the solemnity of these meetings has been written by one who was himself a witness of them at a rather later date :¹

"The philosophers sat dignified and erect. There was a constrained but very amiable silence, which had the impertinence of a tacit inquiry, seeming to ask, 'Who will now proceed to say the finest thing that has ever been said?' It was quite involuntary and unavoidable, for the members lacked that fluent social genius without which a club is impossible. It was a congress of oracles on the one hand, and of curious listeners on the other. I vaguely remember that the Orphic Alcott² invaded the desert of silence with a solemn saying, to which, after due pause, the hon. member for blackberry pastures (Thoreau) responded by some keen and graphic observation, while the Olympian host, anxious that so much good material should be spun into something, beamed encouragement upon all parties. Miles Coverdale (Hawthorne), a statue of Night and Silence, sat a little removed under a portrait of Dante, gazing imperturbably upon the group."

After Thoreau had further delighted the company "with the secrets won from his interviews with Pan in the Walden woods," there followed "a grave

¹ G. W. Curtis, in *Homes of American Authors*.

² An allusion to Alcott's "Orphic Sayings," in the *Dial*, which excited much ridicule.

eating of russet apples by the erect philosophers, and a solemn disappearance into the night."

Early in 1841 Thoreau was invited by Emerson to become an inmate of his household, and for two years from that time he lived under his friend's roof. "He is to have his board, etc., for what labour he chooses to do," wrote Emerson, "and he is thus far a great benefactor and physician to me, for he is an indefatigable and very skilful laborer. Thoreau is a scholar and a poet, and as full of buds of promise as a young apple-tree." And again, to Carlyle, in May 1841, "One reader and friend of yours dwells now in my house, Henry Thoreau, a poet whom you may one day be proud of—a noble, manly youth, full of melodies and inventions. We work together day by day in my garden, and I grow well and strong." Emerson's house was a square, substantial building on the Boston Road, at the outskirts of the village. The ground was low-lying, and at first somewhat bare and open, but some fruit-trees were planted by Thoreau in which Emerson afterwards delighted. Emphatic testimony to Thoreau's helpfulness and kindness of heart has been borne by Emerson's son in some recently published memoirs of his father.¹ "He was as little troublesome a member of the household, with his habits of plain living and high thinking, as could well have been, and in

¹ *Emerson in Concord*, 1889, by Dr. E. W. Emerson.

the constant absences of the master of the house in his lecturing trips, the presence there of such a friendly and sturdy inmate was a great comfort. He was handy with tools, and there was no limit to his usefulness and ingenuity about the house and garden." That Emerson at times felt a little out of sympathy with the rather pugnacious and contradictory temperament of his young friend, as shown in his suggestive remark, "Thoreau is, with difficulty, sweet," is probable enough, and does not necessarily conflict with the above statement. It appears that John Thoreau, Henry's brother, was also intimate with Emerson's family at this time, and was in the habit of performing similar friendly services. On one occasion he fixed a blue-bird's box on Emerson's barn, a gift which remained for years, as Emerson notes, "with every summer a melodious family in it, adorning the place and singing his praises." It was by John Thoreau's arrangement, too, that a daguerreotype portrait was taken of little Waldo Emerson only a few months before the child's death.

Thoreau's friendship with Alcott, though less intimate than with Emerson, was very constant and sincere, and Alcott himself has borne grateful testimony to the worth of Thoreau as a friend. Margaret Fuller, whose connection with the *Dial* brought her into association and correspondence with Thoreau, also seems to have felt considerable interest in his character at this time, and expressed

herself in her letters with her wonted candour and freedom. In rejecting some verses which Thoreau had offered her for publication, she thus sketches the outlines, as they appear to her, of his personality and genius :¹

“He is healthful, rare, of open eye, ready hand, and noble scope. He sets no limit to his life, nor to the invasions of nature; he is not wilfully pragmatical, cautious, ascetic, or fantastical. But he is as yet a somewhat bare hill, which the warm gales of spring have not visited. Yet what could a companion do at present, unless to tame the guardian of the Alps too early? Leave him at peace amid his native snows. He is friendly; he will find the generous office that shall educate him. It is not a soil for the citron and the rose, but for the whortleberry, the pine, or the heather.

“The unfolding of affections, a wider and deeper human experience, the harmonising influence of other natures, will mould the man and melt his verse. He will seek thought less and find knowledge more. I can have no advice or criticism for a person so sincere; but if I give my impression of him, I will say, ‘He says too constantly of nature, she is mine.’ She is not yours till you have been more hers. Seek the lotus, and take a draught of rapture. Say not so confidently, all places, all occasions are alike. This will never come true till you have found it false.

“If intercourse should continue, perhaps a bridge may be made between two minds so widely apart; for I apprehended you in spirit, and you did not seem to mistake me so widely as most of your kind do. If you should find yourself inclined to write to me, as you thought you might, I dare say many thoughts would be suggested to me; many have already, by seeing you from day to day.”

In this same year Thoreau made another acquaint-

¹ The letter, dated 18th October 1841, is printed in Mr. Sanborn's *Life of Thoreau*.

ance which soon ripened into the warmest and most intimate friendship of his life. Ellery Channing, the nephew of the great Unitarian minister, Dr. W. E. Channing, and the brother-in-law of Margaret Fuller, came to Concord in 1841, and lived for a time in a cottage near Emerson's house. He was a poet and a man of genius, though of so whimsical, moody, and unstable a character that he never won the popularity which his friends were constantly anticipating for him. "Could he have drawn out that virgin gold," says Hawthorne of Channing's talent, "and stamped it with the mint-mark that alone gives currency, the world might have had the profit and he the fame." Between him and Thoreau, whose junior he was by one year, there was quickly established a strong bond of sympathy and mutual understanding, which perhaps originated in the fact that each stood in a position of antagonism towards the canons of society. Channing, who was as impatient of routine as Thoreau himself, had not graduated at the University; and while his new friend had been keeping school at Concord he had been living in a log-hut in the wilds of Illinois. He was, according to his own description of himself, "a poet and literary man, one who loved old books, old garrets, old wines, old pipes," and whose pleasure it was to spend the winter in conning *variorum* editions of his favourite authors, and the summer in walking and horticulture. In his unwearying devotion to nature and natural scenery his tastes exactly coin-

cided with Thoreau's, and many were the rambling walks and talks they had together at all hours and seasons, while the good folk of Concord were intent on their more sober business.

It was well for Henry Thoreau that at this period of his early manhood he had formed these lasting friendships with such men as Emerson, Alcott, and Channing; for a blow was impending which might otherwise have left him lonely and friendless on the very threshold of active life. We have seen how his natural self-control and fortitude of character enabled him to perform a striking act of self-renunciation for the sake of the brother to whom he was so closely attached; he was now to be subjected to a still severer trial by the unexpected death of the companion of his youthful days. In the early months of 1841 a calm untroubled career seemed to be opening before him. "Life looks as fair at this moment," so he wrote in his diary, "as a summer's sea. Through this pure unwiped hour, as through a crystal glass, I look out upon the future as a smooth lawn for my virtue to disport in. I see the course of my life, like some retired road, wind on without obstruction into a country maze." But twelve months later the tone of his meditations is changed to a cry of doubt and anguish such as he rarely suffered to escape him. "My life! my life! why will you linger? Are the years short and the months of no account? Can God afford that I should forget him? Is he so indifferent to my

career? Why were my ears given to hear those everlasting strains which haunt my life, and yet to be profaned by these perpetual dull sounds?" In February 1842 John Thoreau died from lock-jaw, caused by an injury done to his hand—a death so sudden and painful that his brother could rarely endure to hear mention of it in after-life, and is said to have turned pale and faint when narrating the circumstances to a friend more than twelve years later. When he visited Cohasset in 1849, and witnessed a terrible death-scene after the shipwreck of an Irish brig, he remarked that if he had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place it would have affected him more. "A man," he adds, "can attend but one funeral in the course of his life, can behold but one corpse"; in which saying there is undoubtedly a reference to his own bereavement. It is noticeable that in his *Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, his brother, though necessarily often alluded to, is not once mentioned by name.

For this heavy blow Thoreau sought and found the needed comfort in that strong intuitive belief in the immutable goodness of Nature, which was the basis of his whole intellectual creed. This feeling is expressed not only in passages of his diary, but also, and more explicitly, in a letter which he addressed to a friend in March 1842, in which he speaks both of his brother's death and of that of little Waldo, Emerson's favourite child, who died early in the same year.

"Soon after John's death I listened to a music-box, and if, at any time, that event had seemed inconsistent with the beauty and harmony of the universe, it was then gently constrained into the placid course of nature by those steady notes, in mild and unoffended tone echoing far and wide under the heavens. But I find these things more strange than sad to me. What right have I to grieve, who have not ceased to wonder? We feel at first as if some opportunities of kindness and sympathy were lost, but learn afterwards that any pure grief is ample recompense for all. That is, if we are faithful; for a great grief is but sympathy with the soul that disposes events, and is as natural as the resin on Arabian trees. Only Nature has a right to grieve perpetually, for she alone is innocent. Soon the ice will melt, and the black-birds sing along the river which he frequented, as pleasantly as ever. The same everlasting serenity will appear in the face of God, and we will not be sorrowful if he is not.

"I do not wish to see John ever again—I mean him who is dead—but that other, whom only he would have wished to see, or to be, of whom he was the imperfect representative. For we are not what we are, nor do we treat or esteem each other for such, but for what we are capable of being.

"As for Waldo, he died as the mist rises from the brook, which the sun will soon dart his rays through. Do not the flowers die every autumn? He had not even taken root here. I was not startled to hear that he was dead: it seemed the most natural event that could happen. His fine organisation demanded it, and nature gently yielded its request. It would have been strange if he had lived. Neither will nature manifest any sorrow at his death, but soon the note of the lark will be heard down in the meadow, and fresh dandelions will spring from the old stocks where he plucked them last summer."

One effect of his brother's death was to incline Thoreau still more strongly towards the transcendental manner of thought; he might indeed have been in danger of lapsing into that vague mysticism which was the besetting weakness of some of the

transcendentalists, had it not been for the sound practical frame of mind which was as much a part of him as his idealism. It was this solid element of good sense that kept the balance in his character ; soar as he might in his transcendental reveries, and scoff as he might at the absurdities of conventional habit, he never lost his hold on the simple essential facts of everyday life.

CHAPTER III

FRIENDSHIP WITH EMERSON

AFTER his brother's death in 1842, Thoreau continued to live in Emerson's house, the bereavement which each of the two friends had recently undergone being doubtless instrumental in bringing them more closely together. Thoreau's regard for Emerson and Mrs. Emerson, as will appear from his letters, was very deep and affectionate, and it was natural that a young man, even when possessed of Thoreau's strength of character, should be lastingly influenced by so distinctive and commanding a personality as Emerson's. It has been remarked by several of those who knew both men, that Thoreau unconsciously caught certain of the traits of Emerson's voice and expression—that he deliberately imitated Emerson is declared on the best authority to be an "idle and untenable" assertion.¹ The following account of Thoreau's receptivity in this respect is given by one of his college class-mates, whom I have already quoted.

¹ *Emerson in Concord*, by Ed. W. Emerson.

"Meeting Mr. Emerson one day, I inquired if he saw much of my class-mate, Mr. Henry D. Thoreau, who was then living in Concord. 'Of Thoreau?' replied Mr. Emerson, his face lighting up with a smile of enthusiasm. 'Oh yes, we could not do without him. When Mr. Carlyle comes to America, I expect to introduce Thoreau to him as *the* man of Concord.' I was greatly surprised at these words. They set an estimate on Thoreau which seemed to me extravagant. . . . Not long after I happened to meet Thoreau in Mr. Emerson's study at Concord—the first time we had come together after leaving college. I was quite startled by the transformation that had taken place in him. His short figure and general cast of countenance were of course unchanged; but in his manners, in the tones of his voice, in his modes of expression, even in the hesitations and pauses of his speech, he had become the counterpart of Mr. Emerson. Thoreau's college voice bore no resemblance to Mr. Emerson's, and was so familiar to my ear that I could have readily identified him by it in the dark. I was so much struck by the change that I took the opportunity, as they sat near together talking, of listening with closed eyes, and I was unable to determine with certainty which was speaking. I do not know to what subtle influences to ascribe it, but after conversing with Mr. Emerson for even a brief time, I always found myself able and inclined to adopt his voice and manner of speaking." ¹

The change noticed in Thoreau was not due only to the stimulating influence of Emerson's personality, though that doubtless was the immediate means of effecting his awakening. Underneath the sluggish and torpid demeanour of his life at the University there had been developing, as his school-mates afterwards recognised, the strong stern qualities which

¹ Rev. D. G. Haskins. I have the following story from Mr. Sanborn. A person seeing Thoreau on the other side of the street at Cambridge, said to his friend, "Look at Thoreau yonder, he is getting up a nose like Emerson's."

were destined to make his character remarkable, and these had now been called into full play both by the natural growth of his mind, and by the opportunities afforded in the brilliant circle of which he was a member. "In later years," says John Weiss,¹ who knew him well at Harvard, "his chin and mouth grew firmer, as his resolute and audacious opinions developed, the eyes twinkled with the latent humor of his criticisms of society." It was a veritable transformation—an awakening of the dormant intellectual fire—and it has been ingeniously suggested that the "transformation" of Donatello in Hawthorne's novel may have been founded in the first place on this fact in the life of Thoreau.

So too with regard to his social and ethical opinions; it would have been strange if the youth of twenty-five had not been in some degree affected and influenced by the philosopher of forty; but the freshness and originality of his genius, in all essential respects, is none the less incontestable. "He once said to me," writes Moncure Conway,² "that he had found in Emerson a world where truth existed with the same perfection as the objects he studied in external nature, his ideas real and exact as antennæ and stamina. It was nature spiritualised. I also found that Thoreau had entered deeply Emerson's secret, and was the most complete incarnation of the earlier idealism of the sage. But because this influ-

¹ *Christian Examiner*, 1865.

² *Emerson at Home and Abroad*.

ence was in the least part personal, the resemblance of Thoreau to Emerson was as superficial as a leaf-like creature to a leaf. Thoreau was quite as original as Emerson. He was not an imitator of any mortal; his thoughts and expressions are suggestions of a Thoreau-principle at work in the universe." Thoreau, in fact, was one of the very few men by whom Emerson was himself in some degree impressed. We are told by Dr. E. W. Emerson that his father "delighted in being led to the very inner shrines of the wood-god by this man, clear-eyed and true and stern enough to be trusted with their secrets"; and there is no doubt that Thoreau influenced him perceptibly in the direction of a more diligent and minute study of nature. He differed in one important respect both from Emerson and from the other members of the Emersonian circle of transcendentalists—in his native and aboriginal hardihood and vigour. To them Concord was a suitable place of adoption; to him it was the place of his birth. The simplicity of living, personal independence, and intimacy with wild nature, which to the others involved more or less a deliberate effort, were in his case an innate and unconscious instinct. "I grow savager and savager every day," he wrote in 1841, "as if fed with raw meat, and my tameness is only the repose of my untameableness."

With Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was the latest addition to the society of Concord, Thoreau had perhaps little in common except his friendship with

Ellery Channing, though courteous relations seem to have subsisted between them. "The writer of fiction," says Channing, "could not read the naturalist probably, and Thoreau had no more love or sympathy for fiction in books than in character." Some of the references to Thoreau in Hawthorne's journal have a touch of the petulance and harshness of judgment to which Hawthorne was rather prone when recording his impressions of his acquaintances; but on the whole he speaks of Thoreau with unusual admiration and respect. "Mr. Thoreau dined with us yesterday," he writes on 1st September 1842. "He is a singular character—a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him; and so far as he is sophisticated, it is in a way and method of his own. He is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and somewhat rustic though courteous manners corresponding very well with such an exterior. But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes him much better than beauty." This description of Thoreau's personal appearance, though interesting as being one of the earliest recorded, by no means agrees with the opinion of other authorities, who speak of Thoreau's face in early manhood as delicate and scholarlike, the mouth at that time giving no indication of the Spartan firmness of his character. Still less reliance is to be placed in some further remarks of Hawthorne's, to the effect that Thoreau's sojourn in Emerson's household had been

burdensome to his host, for all the evidence points strongly in the other direction. The following passage, however, contains an interesting estimate of Thoreau's qualities as a student of nature :

"He is a keen and delicate observer of nature—a genuine observer—which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness. He is familiar with beast, fish, fowl, and reptile, and has strange stories to tell of adventures and friendly passages with these lower brethren of mortality. Herb and flower likewise, wherever they grow, in garden or wild-wood, are his familiar friends. He is also on intimate terms with the clouds, and can tell the portents of storm. It is a characteristic trait that he has a great regard for the memory of the Indian tribes whose wild life would have suited him well; and strange to say, he seldom walks over a ploughed field without picking up an arrow-point, spear-head, or other relic of the red man, as if their spirits willed him to be the inheritor of their simple wealth."

On the evening to which these entries refer, we learn that Thoreau rowed Hawthorne on the Concord river in the boat built and used by himself and his brother in their week's excursion to the Merrimac in 1839, and Hawthorne, delighted at Thoreau's skill in paddling, decided to purchase the boat and change its name from *Musketaquid* to *Pond-lily*. But the art of managing a canoe, which Thoreau had learnt from some Indians who had visited Concord a few years previously, was not to be acquired in a day. "Mr. Thoreau had assured me," writes Hawthorne plaintively, "that it was only

necessary to will the boat to go in any particular direction, and she would immediately take that course, as if imbued with the spirit of the steersman. It may be so with him, but it is certainly not so with me." The difficulty once mastered, Hawthorne took much pleasure in his new purchase, and seems to have been inspired by something of Thoreau's enthusiasm for the wildness of open-air life. "Oh that I could run wild," he exclaims, when recording his first successful voyage in the *Pond-lily*; "that is, that I could put myself in a true relation with nature, and be on friendly terms with all congenial elements." His admiration for Thoreau in this respect lends colour to the supposition that the "young Pan under another name," as Emerson called Thoreau, was the original of Donatello, the mysterious fawn-like character in his novel *Transformation*. Thoreau, on his part, spoke honourably of Hawthorne in his *Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*.

By the middle of 1842 the *Dial*, which had never been prosperous from a pecuniary point of view, was in severe straits, and the editorship having been resigned by Margaret Fuller, was undertaken by Emerson himself, in which work he was largely assisted by Thoreau, who was then living in his house. It is said that Thoreau not only canvassed for new subscribers, read proof-sheets, and selected passages for the "Ethnical Scriptures" of the Oriental philosophers, which formed one of the

features of the *Dial* under Emerson's management, but also acted as sole editor on one or two occasions during his friend's absence.¹ A large number of Thoreau's writings were inserted by Emerson, whose estimate of his ability was far higher than that held by Margaret Fuller; so that the young author was now becoming recognised as one of the leaders of transcendental thought.² The *Dial* for July 1842 contained his delightful essay on "The Natural History of Massachusetts," to which Emerson prefixed an introductory note in which he hinted that Izaak Walton and White of Selborne had now a worthy successor. This essay also won the admiration of Nathaniel Hawthorne. "Methinks this article," he wrote in his diary, "gives a very fair image of Thoreau's mind and character—so true, innate, and literal in observation, yet giving the spirit as well as the letter of what he sees. There are passages of cloudy and dreamy metaphysics, and also passages where his thoughts seem to measure and attune themselves into spontaneous verse, as they rightfully may, since there is real poetry in them. There is a basis of good sense and of moral truth, too, which also is a reflection of his character; for he is not unwise to think and feel, and I find him a healthy and wholesome man to know." The "Winter Walk," another essay of the same character and of almost equal merit, appeared in the *Dial* a year

¹ Vol. iii. No. 3 is said to have been edited by Thoreau.

² For a list of Thoreau's contributions to the *Dial*, see Appendix.

later. The following verses, which have only lately been published, were intended by Thoreau to form a portion of this essay, but were omitted by Emerson. They quaintly describe a mild winter's day in New England, as Thoreau saw it.

“ The rabbit leaps,
The mouse out-creeps,
The flag out-peeps,
Beside the brook ;

“ The ferret weeps,
The marmot sleeps ;
The owlet keeps
In his snug nook.

“ The apples thaw,
The ravens caw,
The squirrels gnaw
The frozen fruit ;

“ To their retreat
I track the feet
Of mice that eat
The apple's root.

“ The snow-dust falls,
The otter crawls,
The partridge calls
Far in the wood :

“ The traveller dreams,
The tree-ice gleams,
The blue jay screams
In angry mood.

“ The willows droop,
The alders stoop,
The pheasants group
Beneath the snow :

"The catkins green
Cast o'er the scene
A summer sheen,
A genial glow."

In July 1842 Thoreau, accompanied by a friend, went on a three days' excursion to Wachusett, a mountain to the west of Concord ("the blue wall," he calls it, "which bounds the western horizon"), which, from its isolated position, forms a conspicuous feature in the landscape, and is familiar by name to all readers of his writings. More than once he expresses a feeling of sympathy with this solitary height :

"But special I remember thee,
Wachusett, who like me
Standest alone without society."

His account of the walk, and how they camped a night on the mountain, was published the following year in the *Boston Miscellany*, under the title of "A Walk to Wachusett." "Wachusett," he wrote, in describing the view from the summit, "is, in fact, the observatory of the State. There lay Massachusetts spread out before us in length and breadth like a map." Thoreau's love of mountains is exemplified in many passages of his diary, and the occasional excursions which he made to the lofty outlying ranges visible from the Concord hills formed some of the most pleasing episodes in his life. "A mountain chain," he says, "determines many things for the statesman and philosopher.

The improvements of civilisation rather creep along its sides than cross its summit. How often is it a barrier to prejudice and fanaticism! In passing over these heights of land, through their thin atmosphere, the follies of the plain are refined and purified; and as many species of plants do not scale their summits, so many species of folly no doubt do not cross the Alleghanies."

Thoreau's predilection for solitude, and indifference or dislike to "society," in the ordinary sense of the word, may be gathered from a good deal of what has already been related of him. There was an aloofness and reserve in his nature which, together with his stern and lofty ideals, made him appear at times somewhat unbending and unapproachable. "Of all phenomena, my own race are the most mysterious and undiscoverable," he wrote in his journal while he was still a youth. "For how many years have I striven to meet one, even on common manly ground, and have not succeeded!" It was no question of being better, or worse, than the generality of men—he was different; and the sympathy which he could not find in civilised man he sought in wild nature, though well aware that Nature herself is nothing except in her relation to man. "I feel," he said, "that my life is very homely, my pleasures very cheap. Joy and sorrow, success and failure, grandeur and meanness, and indeed most words in the English language, do not mean for me what they do for my

neighbors. I see that my neighbors look with compassion on me, that they think it is a mean and unfortunate destiny which makes me to walk in these fields and woods so much, and sail on this river alone. But so long as I find here the only real Elysium, I cannot hesitate in my choice." To say, as is often said, that Thoreau was unsocial is, however, incorrect, except in a limited and qualified degree. "He enjoyed common people," says Channing; "he relished strong acrid characters." The rough honest farmers of Concord were his especial favourites, and in their company he could show plenty of that good fellowship of which he appeared, under some conditions, to be deficient. "He came to see the inside of every farmer's house and head, his pot of beans, and mug of hard cider. Never in too much hurry for a dish of gossip, he could sit out the oldest frequenter of the bar-room, and was alive from top to toe with curiosity." The impression which he left on his friends in Emerson's household, after his two years' residence there, was a wholly agreeable one. "He was by no means unsocial," says Dr. E. W. Emerson,¹ "but a kindly and affectionate person, especially to children, whom he could endlessly amuse and charm in most novel and healthful ways. With grown persons he had tact and high courtesy, though with reserve. But folly, or pretence, or cant, or subserviency, excited his formidable attack."

¹ *Emerson in Concord*, 1889.

The course of his life with the Emersons is well shown in some letters written early in 1843 to a friend at Plymouth :

“CONCORD, 24th January 1843.

“The other day I wrote you a letter to go in Mrs. Emerson’s bundle, but, as it seemed unworthy, I did not send it, and now, to atone for that, I am going to send this, whether it be worthy or not. I will not venture upon news, for, as all the household are gone to bed, I cannot learn what has been told you. Do you read any noble verses nowadays? or do not verses still seem noble? For my own part, they have been the only things I remembered, or that which occasioned them, when all things else were blurred or defaced. All things have put on mourning but they; for the elegy itself is some victorious melody or joy escaping from the wreck.

“It is a relief to read some true book, wherein all are equally dead—equally alive. I think the best parts of Shakespeare would only be enhanced by the most thrilling and affecting events. I have found it so. And so much the more, as they are not intended for consolation.

“We always seem to be living just on the brink of a pure and lofty intercourse, which would make the ills and trivialness of life ridiculous. After each little interval, though it be but for the night, we are prepared to meet each other as gods and goddesses.

“I seem to have dodged all my days with one or two persons, and lived upon expectation—as if the bud would surely blossom; and so I am content to live.

“What means the fact—which is so common, so universal—that some soul that has lost all hope for itself can inspire in another listening soul an infinite confidence in it, even while it is expressing its despair?

“I am very happy in my present environment, though actually mean enough myself, and so, of course, all around me; yet, I am sure, we for the most part are transfigured to one another, and are that to the other which we aspire to be ourselves. The longest course of mean and trivial intercourse may not

prevent my practising this divine courtesy to my companion. Notwithstanding all I hear about brooms, and scouring, and taxes, and housekeeping, I am constrained to live a strangely mixed life—as if even Valhalla might have its kitchen. We are all of us Apollos serving some Admetus.

“I think I must have some muses in my pay that I know not of, for certain musical wishes of mine are answered as soon as entertained. Last summer I went to Hawthorne’s suddenly for the express purpose of borrowing his music-box, and almost immediately Mrs. Hawthorne proposed to lend it to me. The other day I said I must go to Mrs. Barrett’s to hear hers, and lo! straightway Richard Fuller sent me one, for a present from Cambridge. It is a very good one. I should like to have you hear it. I shall not have to employ you to borrow for me now.”

Early in 1843 Thoreau ceased to live in Emerson’s house, having accepted the offer of a tutorship in the family of Mr. William Emerson, the brother of the Concord philosopher, who was then living in Staten Island, near New York. Before leaving Concord to take up this duty, he wrote as follows to Emerson, who was then lecturing at New York. The first part of the letter refers to Mr. Alcott’s arrest for refusal to pay the poll-tax :

“15th Feb. 1843.—I suppose they have told you how near Mr. Alcott went to jail, but I can add a good anecdote to the rest. When Staples [the officer] came to collect Mrs. W.’s taxes my sister Helen asked him what he thought Mr. Alcott meant—what his idea was ; and he answered, ‘I vum, I believe it was nothin’ but principle, for I never heard a man talk honest.’ There was a lecture on peace, by a Mr. Spear (ought he not to be beaten into a plowshare?), that same evening, and as the gentlemen, Lane and Alcott, dined at our house while the matter was in suspense (that is, while the constable was waiting for his receipt

from the jailer), we three settled it that Lane and myself should agitate the state while Winkelried lay in durance. But when over the audience I saw our hero's head moving in the free air of the Universalist church, my fire all went out, and the state was safe as far as I was concerned. But Lane, it seems, had cogitated and even written on the matter in the afternoon, and so, out of courtesy, taking his point of departure from the Spear-man's lecture, he drove gracefully *in medias res*, and gave the affair a good setting-out. But, to spoil all, our martyr, very characteristically, but, as artists would say, in bad taste, brought up the rear with 'My Prisons,' which made us forget Silvio Pellico himself.

"At the end of this strange letter I will not write what alone I had to say—to thank you and Mrs. Emerson for your long kindness to me. It would be more ungrateful than my constant thought. I have been your pensioner for nearly two years, and still left free as the sky. It has been as free a gift as the sun or the summer, though I have sometimes molested you with my mean acceptance of it—I, who have failed to render even those slight services of the *hand* which would have been for a sign at least; and, by the fault of my nature, have failed of many better and higher services. But I will trouble you no more with this, but for once thank you and Heaven."

It is probable that some stanzas of Thoreau's entitled "The Departure" were written about this time, when he had just left with regret the friends whose house had for two years been his home :

"In this roadstead I have ridden,
In this covert I have hidden :
Friendly thoughts were cliffs to me,
And I hid beneath their lee.

"This true people took the stranger,
And warm-hearted housed the ranger ;
They received their roving guest,
And have fed him with the best ;

“Whatsoe’er the land afforded
To the stranger’s wish accorded,—
Shook the olive, stripped the vine,
And expressed the strengthening wine.

“And by night they did spread o’er him
What by day they spread before him ;
That good will which was repast
Was his covering at last.”

On 7th April 1843 there is a further mention of Thoreau in Hawthorne’s note-book. When Hawthorne was dozing in his study, with the *Dial* before him as a soporific, Thoreau called to return a book, and tell him of his intended visit to Staten Island. “We had some conversation upon this subject, and upon the spiritual advantages of change of place, and upon the *Dial*, and upon Mr. Alcott, and other kindred subjects. I am glad on Mr. Thoreau’s account that he is going away, as he is out of health, and may be benefited by his removal ; but on my own account I should like to have him remain here, he being one of the few persons, I think, with whom to hold intercourse is like hearing the wind among the boughs of the forest tree, and with all this wild freedom there is high and classic cultivation in him too.” The favourite musical-box, which had been given to Thoreau by a Cambridge friend, was on this occasion left in Hawthorne’s charge.

Several months were spent by Thoreau in Staten Island, during the spring and summer of 1843. Here, during his spare hours, he continued his

walking excursions as regularly as at Concord, and was frequently mistaken by the inhabitants for a busy surveyor, who was studying every yard of the ground with a view to some extensive speculation. From an old ruined fort he used to watch the emigrant vessels pass up the narrow channel from the wide outer bay and go on their course to New York, or, as the case might be, remain in quarantine at Staten Island, when the passengers would be allowed to go ashore and refresh themselves on that "artificial piece of the land of liberty." From the low hills in the interior of the island, among the homesteads where the Huguenots had been the first settlers, he could see the long procession of out-going ships, stretching far as the eye could reach, "with stately march and silken sails," as he describes it; at other times he roamed along the desolate sandy shore, where packs of half-wild dogs were on the look-out for carcasses of horses or oxen washed up by the tide. "An island," he says, in his *Week*, "always pleases my imagination, even the smallest, as a continent and integral portion of the globe. I have a fancy for building my hut on one. Even a bare, grassy isle, which I can see entirely over at a glance, has some undefined and mysterious charms for me."

The following extracts are from his letters to Mrs. Emerson, for whom, as will be seen, he felt the most grateful affection and regard :

"22d May.—I thank you for your influence for two years. I was fortunate to be subjected to it, and am now to remember it. It is the noblest gift we can make; what signify all others that can be bestowed? You have helped to keep my life 'on loft,' as Chaucer says of Griselda, and in a better sense. You always seemed to look down at me as from some elevation—some of your high humilities—and I was the better for having to look up. I felt taxed not to disappoint your expectation; for could there be any accident so sad as to be respected for something better than we are? It was a pleasure even to go away from you, as it is not to meet some, as it apprised me of my high relations; and such a departure is a sort of further introduction and meeting. Nothing makes the earth seem so spacious as to have friends at a distance; they make the latitudes and longitudes.

"I have hardly begun to live on Staten Island yet; but, like the man who, when forbidden to tread on English ground, carried Scottish ground in his boots, I carry Concord ground in my boots and in my hat,—and am I not made of Concord dust? I cannot realise that it is the roar of the sea I hear now, and not the wind in Walden woods. I find more of Concord, after all, in the prospect of the sea, beyond Sandy Hook, than in the fields and woods."

"20th June.—I have only read a page of your letter, and have come out to the top of the hill at sunset, where I can see the ocean, to prepare to read the rest. It is fitter that it should hear it than the walls of my chamber. The very crickets here seem to chirp around me as they did not before. I feel as if it were a great daring to go on and read the rest, and then to live accordingly. There are more than thirty vessels in sight going to sea. I am almost afraid to look at your letter. I see that it will make my life very steep, but it may lead to fairer prospects than this.

"My dear friend, it was very noble in you to write me so truthful an answer. It will do as well for another world as for this; such a voice is for no particular time nor person, but it makes him who may hear it stand for all that is lofty and true

in humanity. The thought of you will constantly elevate my life; it will be something always above the horizon to behold, as when I look up at the evening star. I think I know your thoughts without seeing you, and as well here as in Concord. You are not at all strange to me.

"What wealth is it to have such friends that we cannot think of them without elevation! And we can think of them any time and anywhere, and it costs nothing but the lofty disposition. I cannot tell you the joy your letter gives me, which will not quite cease till the latest time. Let me accompany your finest thoughts.

"I send my love to my other friend and brother, whose nobleness I slowly recognise."

"16th October.—I have been reading lately what of Quarles's poetry I could get. He was a contemporary of Herbert, and a kindred spirit. I think you would like him. It is rare to find one who was so much of a poet and so little of an artist. He wrote long poems, almost epics for length, about Jonah, Esther, Samson, and Solomon, interspersed with meditations after a quite original plan, —Shepherd's Oracles, Comedies, Romances, Fancies, and Meditations—the quintessence of meditations—and Enchiridions of Meditations all divine—and what he calls his Morning Muse; besides prose works as curious as the rest. He was an unwearied Christian, and a reformer of some old school withal. Hopelessly quaint, as if he lived all alone and knew nobody but his wife, who appears to have revered him. He never doubts his genius; it is only he and his God in all the world. He uses language sometimes as greatly as Shakespeare, and though there is not much straight grain in him, there is plenty of tough, crooked timber. In an age when Herbert is revived Quarles surely ought not to be forgotten."

During the sojourn in Staten Island, Thoreau was frequently in New York, where he made the acquaintance of W. H. Channing, Edward Palmer, Lucretia Mott, Henry James, Horace Greeley,

and other persons of note. "In this city," he wrote to his sister on 21st July, "I have seen, since I last wrote, W. H. Channing, at whose house in Fifteenth Street I spent a few pleasant hours, discussing the all-absorbing question—what to do for the race. Also Horace Greeley, editor of the *Tribune*, who is cheerfully in earnest at his office of all work, a hearty New Hampshire boy as one could wish to meet, and says, 'Now be neighborly.'" With Greeley, who was at this time preaching Fourierism in the *New York Tribune*, in conjunction with Margaret Fuller and George Ripley, Thoreau established a firm friendship; and it will be seen that Greeley was able, a few years later, to render him valuable service in securing publication for his writings.

In a letter addressed to Emerson from Staten Island, 23d May 1843, Thoreau thus relates his impressions of New York:

"You must not count much upon what I can do or learn in New York. Everything there disappoints me but the crowd, rather, I was disappointed with the rest before I came. I have no eyes for their churches, and what else they have to brag of. Though I know but little about Boston, yet what attracts me in a quiet way seems much meaner and more pretending than there—libraries, pictures, and faces in the street. You don't know where any respectability inhabits. The crowd is something new and to be attended to. It is worth a thousand Trinity Churches and Exchanges, while it is looking at them; and it will run over them and trample them underfoot. There are two things I hear and am aware I live in the neighbourhood of—the roar of the sea and the hum of the city."

The following passage from a letter to his mother shows that Thoreau's thoughts were still at Concord, and gives an agreeable insight into the inner home life of his father's household :

"16th August 1843.—I am chiefly indebted to your letters for what I have learned of Concord and family news, and am very glad when I get one. I should have liked to be in Walden woods with you, but not with the railroad. I think of you all very often, and wonder if you are still separated from me only by so many miles of earth, or so many miles of memory. This life we live is a strange dream, and I don't believe at all any account men give of it. Methinks I should be content to sit at the back-door in Concord, under the poplar tree, henceforth for ever. Not that I am homesick at all—for places are strangely indifferent to me—but Concord is still a cynosure to my eyes, and I find it hard to attach it, even in imagination, to the rest of the globe, and tell where the seam is.

"I fancy that this Sunday evening you are poring over some select book, almost transcendental perchance, or else *Burgh's Dignity* or Massillon, or the *Christian Examiner*. Father has just taken one more look at the garden, and is now absorbed in Chaptelle, or reading the newspaper quite abstractedly, only looking up occasionally over his spectacles to see how the rest are engaged, and not to miss any newer news that may not be in the paper. Helen has slipped in for the fourth time to learn the very latest item. Sophia, I suppose, is at Bangor; but Aunt Louisa, without doubt, is just flitting away to some good meeting, to save the credit of you all."

The railroad alluded to in the above letter was the line from Boston to Fitchburg, which was being constructed at this time by Irish labourers, and passed along the west shore of Walden Pond. One can imagine the feelings with which Thoreau heard

of this intrusion into his favourite and most solitary haunts. "That devilish Iron Horse," he exclaims in *Walden*, "whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore; that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks!" But except for the actual construction of the line, and the building of the Railway Station, this inroad of civilisation did not greatly affect the calm tenor of Concord life.

Though literary work had not yet come to be regarded by Thoreau as his principal employment, his pen was not idle during his visit to Staten Island. He wrote some articles for the *Democratic Review* and *Dial*, and made some translations from the Greek of Æschylus and Pindar. The *Dial*, in spite of the fact that its contributors wrote gratuitously, was unable to pay its way, and the difficulties in which it was already involved led to its discontinuance in the spring of 1844. But although the transcendentalist organ thus failed to win the necessary public support, transcendentalism as a movement was now in the heyday of its vigour. It was, as we have seen, part of the transcendentalist creed that every one should labour with his own hands, and that men should endeavour to revert, as much as possible, from an artificial to a simple mode of living. When these thoughts began to be embodied in deeds the movement took two directions, the one towards

collective action, and the other towards individualism. It was in reference to the former that Emerson wrote to Carlyle in 1840: "We are all a little wild with numberless projects of social reform ; not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket." The most important of such communal projects was the famous Brook Farm experiment, which was commenced in the spring of 1841, and came to an end in 1847, on which subject the opinion of the chief transcendentalists was divided, Margaret Fuller and George Ripley joining heartily in the enterprise, while Emerson, Alcott, and Thoreau stood aloof. The spread of Fourierism in New England during these same years had led to the establishment of "Phalansteries," in which Horace Greeley and W. H. Channing took a leading part. "He believes only or mainly," wrote Thoreau of Greeley in 1843, "first in the Sylvanic Association, somewhere in Pennsylvania ; and secondly, and most of all, in a new association, to go into operation soon in New Jersey, with which he is connected." Yet another attempt at transcendental colonisation was that made by Alcott and one or two friends in 1843, on an estate near Harvard, which was purchased by them and named "Fruitlands." This small colony, to which Thoreau paid a visit, though he declined the offer of membership, was, like most of the rest, a failure ; and in less than a year Alcott gave it up and returned to Concord. Such were the essays which

the transcendentalists made in co-operative action.

Of the second, or individualist, method of practising the "return to nature," Thoreau himself was destined to be the most successful exponent. His utter distrust of communities is very characteristic of his independent and self-assertive temperament. "As for these communities," he wrote in his journal,¹ "I think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven. Do not think your virtue will be boarded with you. It will never live on the interest of your money, depend upon it. The boarder has no home. In heaven I hope to bake my own bread and clean my own linen. The tomb is the only boarding-house in which a hundred are served at once. In the catacombs we may dwell together and prop one another up without loss." But, though he had no intention of sacrificing one iota of his individuality by joining a community at Brook Farm or elsewhere, he had for some time been considering the feasibility of putting his principles into practice by a temporary and tentative withdrawal from the society of his fellow-townsmen. This desire appears in his journal as early as 1841. "I want to go soon and live away by the pond," he wrote on December 24th, possibly with an eye to the impending Christmas festivities, "where I shall hear only the wind whispering among the reeds. It

¹ 3d March 1841.

will be success if I shall have left myself behind. But my friends ask what I will do when I get there. Will it not be employment enough to watch the progress of the seasons?" A couple of months before the date of this entry Margaret Fuller had written to Thoreau: "Let me know whether you go to the lonely hut, and write to me about Shakespeare if you read him there." It has already been mentioned that Walden Pond was associated with Thoreau's earliest reminiscences; as a child he had thought he would like to live there, and as a boy he had been accustomed to come to its shores on dark nights, and fish for the "pouts" which were supposed to be attracted by the glare of a fire lit close to the water's edge, or, on a summer morning, to sit and muse for hours in his boat, as it drifted where the wind took it.

There was, however, another spot with which he was also familiar, which came very near being the scene of his projected hermitage. In his youthful voyages up the Concord river he had noticed, at a distance of about two miles from the village, an old-fashioned ruinous farm-house, concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which was heard the barking of the house-dog. This was the Hollowell Farm, the seclusion of which, if we may trust a passage in *Walden*, so tempted Thoreau that, at some period in his early manhood, he actually agreed to become its possessor. But before the purchase was effected and the contract signed, the

owner of the place changed his mind, and offered Thoreau ten dollars to release him from the bargain. "Now, to speak the truth," says Thoreau, in his dry, humorous manner, "I had but ten cents in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell if I was that man who had ten cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather to be generous, I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for a wheelbarrow left."

We may surmise that in 1844, after the conclusion of his educational engagement in Staten Island, he was still more decidedly bent on putting his favourite plan into execution; and that his thoughts now reverted to Walden woods as the place most suitable for his purpose. Alcott's experiment at "Fruitlands," although unsuccessful in a pecuniary sense, had doubtless stimulated Thoreau's inclination to a forest life; and Emerson himself, while sceptical, in the main, as to the wisdom of such enterprises, had bought land on both sides of Walden Pond, with the idea of building a summer-house. Ellery Channing, who in his youth had made trial of a rough backwoods life, was of course taken into his friend's confidences respecting this retirement to the woods. "I see nothing for you in this earth," he wrote in 1845, "but that field

which I once christened 'Briers'; go out upon that, build yourself a hut, and there begin the grand process of devouring yourself alive. I see no alternative, no other hope for you. Eat yourself up; you will eat nobody else, nor anything else." Encouraged by these exhortations, and firmly trusting the promptings of his own destiny, Thoreau determined in the spring of 1845, being now in his twenty-eighth year, to build himself a hut on the shore of Walden Pond and there live for such time, and in such a manner, as might best conduce to his intellectual and spiritual advantage. The objects of his retirement have been so often misunderstood that they will bear repetition in his own words:

"Finding that my fellow-citizens were not likely to offer me any room in the court-house, or any curacy or living anywhere else, but that I must shift for myself, I turned my face more exclusively than ever towards the woods, where I was better known. I determined to go into business at once, and not wait to acquire the usual capital, using such slender means as I had already got. My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles. . . . I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and

publish its meanness to the world ; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion."

Walden was, in fact, to Thoreau what Brook Farm was to others of the transcendentalists—a retreat suitable for philosophic meditation, and the practice of a simpler, hardier, and healthier life.

CHAPTER IV

AT WALDEN

WALDEN POND, on the shore of which Thoreau determined to make his hermitage, is a small lake, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord, surrounded by low thickly-wooded hills. It is described by Thoreau as "a gem of the first water, which Concord wears in her coronet . . . a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three-quarters in circumference, and containing about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation." Its water, which is of a greenish-blue colour, is so brilliantly transparent that the bottom is visible at a depth of thirty feet, in which respect it is unrivalled by the other ponds of the neighbourhood, except by White Pond, which lies some two miles westward, on the other side of the Concord river. Walden had doubtless in primitive ages been frequented by the Indians, as was testified by arrow-heads discoverable on its shores,

and by dim traces of a narrow shelf-like path, "worn by the feet of aboriginal hunters," which ran round the steeply-sloping bank. In the early days of the Massachusetts colony, the dense woods, which even in Thoreau's memory completely surrounded the pond, had been the haunt of fugitives and outlaws; but, at a later period, the road from Concord to Lincoln, which skirts the east shore of Walden, had been dotted by the cottages and gardens of a small hamlet, and had resounded, as Thoreau tells us, "with the laugh and gossip of inhabitants." "Now," he adds, "only a dent in the earth marks the site of these dwellings, with buried cellar-stones, and strawberries, raspberries, thimbleberries, hazel-bushes, and sumachs growing in the sunny sward there; some pitch-pine or gnarled oak occupies what was the chimney-nook, and a sweet-scented black-pitch, perhaps, waves where the door-stone was." Drink had been the ruin of these former settlers; and the hardy water-drinker who now came to make his home in Walden woods took care to choose a new and unpolluted spot for his dwelling. "I am not aware," he says, "that any man has ever built on the spot which I occupy. Deliver me from a city built on the site of a more ancient city, whose materials are ruins, whose gardens cemeteries."

The ground chosen by Thoreau for the building of his hut was on a wood-lot belonging to Emerson—a sloping bank at the outskirts of the forest, on the north shore of the pond, and some thirty or

forty yards from the water-edge. No house could be seen from this point, the horizon being bounded by the woods on the opposite shore, half a mile distant; and although the village was within easy reach, and the newly-constructed railway was visible on one hand, and the woodland road on the other, there was no neighbour within a mile, and the solitude was usually as complete as the strictest anchorite could have desired. This position exactly suited Thoreau's requirements, since he could either pursue his meditations undisturbed, or, if the mood took him, pay a visit to his friends in the village, from whose society he had no intention of permanently banishing himself.

So one morning towards the end of March 1845, when the approach of spring was already heralded by the voice of song-birds and the thawing of the ice on Walden, the "Bachelor of Nature" addressed himself to the pleasurable task of "squatting" on the selected spot. Having borrowed the favourite axe of his friend Alcott, who warned him that it was "the apple of his eye," he began to cut down pine-trees, and hew the timber into shape for the frame of his hut, working leisurely each day, so as to get the full enjoyment of his occupation, and returning betimes to the village to sleep. After two or three weeks spent in this labour, when the house was framed and ready for raising, he dug his cellar in the sand of the sloping bank, six feet square by seven deep; and having bought the planks of a

shanty belonging to an Irishman who worked on the Fitchbury railroad, he transported them to the site of the hut. Early in May he set up the frame of his house, on which occasion—for the sake of neighbourliness, as he is careful to tell us, rather than of necessity—he accepted the assistance of some of his friends, among whom were Alcott (to whom he returned the axe sharper than he had received it), George William Curtis,¹ a young enthusiast, fresh from Harvard and Brook Farm, who was then spending a year or two at Concord, having hired himself out as an agricultural labourer, and Edmund Hosmer, one of the leading farmers of Concord, with whom he was on intimate terms. The hut, which was ten feet wide by fifteen long, with a garret and a closet, a large window at the side, a door at one end, and a brick fire-place at the other, was then boarded and roofed so as to be quite rain-proof, but during the summer months it remained without plastering or chimney. It was the 4th of July, or Independence Day—a significant and auspicious date for the commencement of such an undertaking—when Thoreau, who previously had been owner of no habitations but a boat and a tent, took up his residence in this house, which he could call his own property, and which, as he proudly records, had cost him but twenty-eight dollars in the building.

¹ In his contribution to *Homes of American Authors* he refers to Thoreau's hut. "One pleasant afternoon a small party of us helped him raise it—a bit of life as Arcadian as any at Brook Farm."

The question of "furnishing," which is a cause of such anxious consideration to so many worthy householders, was solved by Thoreau with his usual boldness and expedition. "Furniture!" he exclaims, in an outburst of pitying wonder at the spectacle of men who are enslaved by their own chattels. "Thank God, I can sit and I can stand without the aid of a furniture warehouse." His furniture at Walden, which was partly of his own manufacture, consisted of "a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter, a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet and a frying-pan, a dipper, a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp." Curtains he did not need, since there were no gazers to look in on him except the sun and moon, and he had no carpet in danger of fading, nor meat and milk to be guarded from sunshine or moonbeam. When a lady offered him a mat, he declined it as being too cumbrous and troublesome an article; he preferred to wipe his feet on the sod outside his door. Finding that three pieces of limestone which lay upon his desk required to be dusted daily, he threw them out of the window, determined that if he had any furniture to dust, it should be "the furniture of his mind." With a house thus organised, housework, instead of being an exhausting and ever-recurring labour, was a pleasant pastime. "When my floor was dirty," he says, "I rose early, and setting all my furniture

out of doors on the grass, bed and bedstead making but one budget, dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white ; and by the time the villagers had broken their fast, the morning sun had dried my house sufficiently to allow me to move in again, and my meditations were almost uninterrupted. It was pleasant to see my whole household effects on the grass, making a little pile like a gipsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amidst the pines and hickories."

Having thus chosen his surroundings, he was free to choose also the most congenial manner of life. "Every morning," he says, "was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say, innocence, with Nature herself." He rose early, and took his bath in the pond, a habit which he regarded as nothing less than "a religious exercise." "I am inclined to think bathing," he remarks in his journal, "almost one of the necessities of life. One farmer who came to bathe in Walden one Sunday while I lived there, told me it was the first bath he had had for fifteen years. Now what kind of religion could his be?" After the morning bath came the work—or the leisure—of the day. In the early summer, before the building was finished, he had ploughed and planted about two and a half acres of the light sandy soil in the neighbourhood of his hut, the crop chiefly consisting of beans, with a few

potatoes, peas, and turnips ; and during this first summer at Walden the bean-field was the chief scene of his labours, from five o'clock till noon being the hours devoted to the work. "I came to love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. But why should I raise them? Only heaven knows. This was my curious labour all the summer—to make this portion of the earth's surface, which had yielded only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like before, sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers, produce this pulse." Day after day the travellers on the road from Concord to Lincoln would rein in their horses and pause to look with wonder on this strange husbandman, who cultivated a field where all else was wild upland, who put no manure on the soil, and continued to sow beans at a time when others had begun to hoe.

Meantime the husbandman himself was deriving from his rough matter-of-fact occupation a sort of sublime transcendental satisfaction ; it was agriculture and mysticism combined to which he was devoting his bodily and mental energies. "When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labour which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop." What matter if, when the pecuniary gains and losses of the season came to be estimated, he found himself with a balance of but eight dollars in his favour, which represented his year's income from the farm? Was he not less

anxious and more contented than his fellow-agriculturists of the village? "I was more independent," he says, "than any farmer in Concord, for I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment. Beside being better off than they already, if my house had been burned or my crops had failed, I should have been nearly as well off as before." The following season he improved on these results by cultivating only a third of an acre, and using the spade instead of the plough. Whatever money was further needed for his food and personal expenses, he earned by occasional day-labour in the village, for he had, as he tells us, "as many trades as fingers."

After a morning thus spent in work, whether manual or literary, he would refresh himself by a second plunge in the pond, and enjoy an afternoon of perfect freedom, rambling, according to his wont, by river or forest, wherever his inclination led him. He had also his entire days of leisure, when he could not afford "to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands." "Sometimes," he says, "in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines, and hickories, and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west

window, or the noise of some traveller's waggon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time." He was well aware that these day-dreams must be accounted sheer idleness by his enterprising townsmen; but of that he himself was the best and only judge. "I grew in these seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been." On moonlit evenings he would walk on the sandy beach of the pond, and wake the echoes of the surrounding woods with his flute.

We have seen what amount of shelter Thoreau thought needful for his comfort; his estimate of what is necessary in the way of food and clothing was conceived in the same spirit. His costume was habitually coarse, shabby, and serviceable; he would wear corduroy, Channing tells us, but not shoddy. His drab hat, battered and weather-stained, his clothes often torn and as often mended, his dusty cow-hide boots, all told of hard service in field and forest, and of the unwillingness of their wearer to waste a single dollar on the vanities of outward appearance. He wished his garments to become assimilated to himself, and to receive a true impress of his character; he would not be, like some king or nobleman, a wooden horse on which clean clothes might be hung for a day's ornament. "No man," he says, "ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety,

commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience." His diet was fully as simple and economical as his clothing; his food, while he stayed at Walden, consisting of rice, Indian meal, potatoes, and very rarely salt pork, and his drink of water. He baked his own bread of rye and Indian meal, at first procuring yeast from the village, but afterwards coming to the conclusion that it was "simpler and more respectable" to omit the process of leavening. He had a strong preference at all times for a vegetarian diet, though he would occasionally catch a mess of fish for his dinner from Walden Pond, and pleads guilty on one occasion to having slaughtered and devoured a wood-chuck which had made inroads on his bean field.

"There is a certain class of unbelievers," he says, "who sometimes ask me such questions as, if I think I can live on vegetable food alone; and to strike at the root of the matter at once—for the root is faith—I am accustomed to answer such, that I can live on board nails. If they cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say." The moral of it all was, according to Thoreau's experience, that incredibly little trouble was necessary to provide a sufficient diet; a dish of green sweet-corn, or even of purslane, boiled and salted, was sometimes enough for his dinner. "Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred

dishes, five ; and reduce other things in proportion."

In November, when the summer weather was ended and frost coming on apace, Thoreau put the finishing touches to his house by shingling its sides, building a fire-place and chimney, and finally plastering the walls. Hardly was this last process over when the winter set in with full severity, and by the middle of December the pond was completely frozen and the ground covered with snow. He now began, in the full sense, to inhabit his hermitage, his outdoor employments being limited to collecting and chopping firewood, while during the long evening hours he occupied himself with the journal, which he still kept with unfailing regularity, and which formed the basis of his volumes on *Walden* and the *Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, the latter of which was now in course of preparation. Now, too, he had full leisure to weigh the respective merits of society and solitude. Not only had he no neighbours, but he kept no domestic animals, "neither dog, cat, cow, pig, nor hens, so that you would have said there was a deficiency of domestic sounds; neither the churn, nor the spinning-wheel, nor even the singing of the kettle, nor the hissing of the urn, nor children crying, to comfort me. Not even rats in the wall—only squirrels on the roof and under the floor, a whip-poor-will on the ridge-pole, a blue jay screaming beneath the window, a hare or wood-

chuck under the house, a screech-owl or a cat-owl behind it, a flock of wild geese or a laughing loon on the pond, and a fox to bark in the night." Of the solitude thus offered him he availed himself with gratitude and profit; it was during this period that he matured his thoughts and perfected his literary style, so that having come to Walden with still somewhat of the crudeness of youth, he might leave it with the firmness and dignity of manhood.

It is, however, a mistake to suppose that Thoreau was entirely isolated from society during his seclusion at Walden—such had never been his intention, and such was not, in fact, the case. Every day or two, in winter as well as in summer, he strolled to the village to see his relatives and friends, and to hear the gossip of the hour, sometimes returning late at night after supper at a friend's house, and steering his way with difficulty through the darkness of the Walden woods. The Fitchburg railroad often provided him with a pathway on these occasions; indeed, so well known was he along the line, that the drivers of the trains were accustomed to bow to him as to an old acquaintance. Nor was the visiting altogether on Thoreau's side; for, as may well be believed, the news of his strange retirement brought him numerous unbidden guests, whom he received with such hospitality as was possible in his sylvan abode. To the simple holiday folk, who came to enjoy themselves and make the best of their time, such

as children and railroad men, wood-choppers, fishermen, hunters, and even idiots from the almshouse, he seems invariably to have extended a hearty welcome and good fellowship; not so, perhaps, to the dilettante reformers, prying gossips, and sham philanthropists, whose advances he characteristically resented, men who "did not know when their visit had terminated," though he sought to indicate this fact to them by going about his business again, and answering them "from greater and greater remoteness." "One man," he says, "proposed a book in which visitors should write their names, as at the White Mountains; but, alas, I have too good a memory to make that necessary."

He also received welcome visits from Emerson, on whose land he was "squatting," and from his other personal friends. Ellery Channing spent a fortnight with him in his hut at Walden, at the time when he was building his fire-place, and was a frequent visitor at all seasons of the year. "The one who came farthest to my lodge," says Thoreau, "through deepest snows and most dismal tempests, was a poet. . . . We made that small house ring with boisterous mirth, and resound with the murmur of much sober talk, making amends then to Walden vale for the long silences. . . . We made many a 'bran new' theory of life over a dish of gruel, which combined the advantages of conviviality with the clear-headedness which philosophy requires." Alcott was another of his regular guests, and it

is he who is referred to in the pages of *Walden* as "one of the last of the philosophers," the man "of the most faith of any alive." "During my last winter at the pond," says Thoreau, in reference to Alcott, "there was another welcome visitor, who at one time came from the village, through snow, and rain, and darkness, till he saw my lamp through the trees, and shared with me some long winter evenings." On a Sunday afternoon he would sometimes be cheered by the approach of the "long-headed farmer," Edmund Hosmer, one of the firmest and heartiest of his friends, and the talk would then be of "rude and simple times, when men sat about large fires in cold bracing weather, with clear heads." It will be seen from these instances that Thoreau was by no means the misanthropic anchorite that some have imagined him. He well knew the value of social intercourse; but, on the other hand, he knew also that "society is commonly too cheap"; he loved at times to be alone, and confesses that he "never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude."

There is some reason to suppose that the Walden hermitage was occasionally a refuge to quite other visitors than those who have been enumerated. It is said that Thoreau's hut was "a station in the great Underground Railway" for runaway slaves,¹ and though Thoreau himself only mentions one

¹ Essay on Thoreau in *Men and Books*, by R. L. Stevenson.

visitor of this kind ("one real runaway slave, whom I had helped to forward toward the north star"), there is no improbability in the statement. He had been brought up, as already mentioned, in an atmosphere of abolition; his kinsfolk were all ardent abolitionists; and he always remembered with pleasure that he had rung the bell of the town-hall on the occasion of a great meeting addressed by Emerson at Concord in 1844, to celebrate the emancipation of the English West Indian slaves. "The institution of American slavery," says Channing, "was a filthy and rotten shed which Thoreau used his utmost strength to cut away and burn up. From first to last he loved and honoured abolitionism. Not one slave alone was expedited to Canada by Thoreau's personal assistance." It may well be, therefore, that the hut at Walden was a convenient station, by reason of its extreme seclusion, for purposes of this sort, and that Thoreau was hinting at this in his narrative of the reasons which led him to choose that spot. "I have thought," he says, "that Walden Pond would be a good place for business, not solely on account of the railroad and the ice-trade; it offers advantages which it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good post, and a good foundation."

It was in connection with Thoreau's abolitionist enthusiasm that a remarkable incident befell him during his first autumn at Walden. An intensely individualistic view of life had naturally led him,

as it led Alcott and some other transcendentalists, to the adoption of anarchist doctrines, and he heartily accepted and endorsed the dictum that "that government is best which governs not at all." His deep disapproval of the foreign policy of the United States in their war with Mexico, and his still stronger detestation^{*} of the sanction given by Government to negro slavery at home, had the effect of spurring his latent discontent into a sense of active personal antagonism to the State and its representatives, and he felt that something more than a verbal protest was demanded from those who, like himself, were required to show their allegiance in the form of taxes. "I meet this American Government, or its representative the State Government, directly, and face to face, once a year—no more—in the person of its tax-gatherer. . . . If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood."¹

So when his "civil neighbor," the tax-gatherer, came to Thoreau for the poll-tax, it was refused (as the church-tax had been refused by him in 1838) on the ground that he did not care to trace the course of his dollar "till it buys a man, or a musket to shoot one with." To the anxious inquiry

¹ Essay on *Civil Disobedience*, 1849.

of the tax-gatherer what he was to do under these perplexing circumstances, the answer returned was that if he really wished to do anything, he should resign his office. The first difficulty of this kind had arisen, as we have seen, in 1843, when Alcott, who was probably acting in conjunction with Thoreau, was arrested for his refusal to pay tax; but it was not till 1845¹ that the State proceeded against the younger, and, as it was presumably thought, less important offender. One afternoon, when Thoreau chanced to have gone in from Walden to the village to get a shoe from the cobbler's, he was intercepted and lodged in the town jail. "Henry, why are you here?" were the words of Emerson, when he came to visit his friend in this new place of retirement. "Why are you *not* here?" was the reply of the prisoner, who held that, under an unjust Government, a prison-cell was the right abode for a just man. A humorous account of the night he spent in prison, and of the fellow-criminals he met there, was afterwards written by Thoreau. "It was like travelling," he tells us, "into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I had never heard the town-clock strike before, nor the evening sounds of the village, for we slept with the windows open, which were inside the grating. It was a

¹ The date is wrongly given in Emerson's Memoir as 1847.

closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it. I never had seen its institutions before. I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about." The next morning he was discharged, some friend—probably Emerson—having paid the tax without his consent—a somewhat tame conclusion of the dispute on which he had not reckoned, but which he accepted with his usual *insouciance*. He proceeded straight from the prison door, among the meaning glances of his fellow-townsmen, to finish the errand in which he had been interrupted overnight, and having put on his mended shoe, was soon in command of a huckleberry party, on a hill two miles from Concord, from which spot, as he characteristically remarked, "the State was nowhere to be seen."

Meanwhile, as the seasons passed on, the daily walks on which Thoreau had from his boyhood set such store were by no means forgotten; hermit though he might be, he was still above all things the poet-naturalist. "No weather," he says in *Walden*, "interfered fatally with my walks, or rather my going abroad, for I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree, or a yellow-birch, or an old acquaintance among the pines." In 1847 he had some correspondence and personal intercourse with Agassiz, who had come to the States in the preceding autumn, and paid more than one visit to Concord. On several occasions

collections of fishes, turtles, and various local *fauna* were sent to Agassiz by Thoreau, of whose knowledge and observation the great naturalist formed a high opinion. In one way, however, Thoreau differed widely from other members of the same profession, for, though a naturalist, he had discarded the use of the gun and the trap before he lived in the woods, his field-glass being the only weapon of attack which he now carried in his excursions. "As for fowling," he says, "during the last years that I carried a gun my excuse was that I was studying ornithology, and sought only new or rare birds, but I confess that I am now inclined to think that there is a finer way of ornithology than this. It requires so much closer attention to the habits of the birds that, if for that reason only, I have been willing to omit the gun." Fishing was the only sport which he did not abandon, and even on this point his conscience was already uneasy, and he had discovered that he could not fish "without falling a little in self-respect." Nevertheless the hunting instinct, restrained for the time, was still dormant in him, and was ready to break out on occasion. "He confessed," says Emerson, "that he sometimes felt like a hound or a panther, and, if born among Indians, would have been a fell hunter. But, restrained by the Massachusetts culture, he played out the game in the mild form of botany and ichthyology." During all his walks over the fields and forests of the Walden neighbourhood

in which he was absent for hours, and sometimes days together, he never fastened the door of his hut; yet he never missed anything but a volume of Homer, and "was never molested by any person but those who represented the State." His longest absence from Walden seems to have been the fortnight he spent in Maine, in September 1846, when, in company with a cousin who was residing at Bangor, he explored the recesses of the Maine woods, ascended the mountain Ktaadn, and made personal acquaintance with some of the native Indian hunters, whose habits he was never weary of studying.

Thus two summers and two winters passed by, fruitful in quiet meditation and ripening experience, though offering few incidents which call for special remark. When the summer of 1847 had arrived, he began to feel that the object for which he retired to Walden was now sufficiently accomplished, and that it was time for him to return to the more social atmosphere of the village. His period of retirement had not been wasted or mispent, for he had learnt by his experiment two great lessons concerning the practical life and the spiritual. First, "that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely," it being his own experience that he could meet all the expenses of the year by six weeks of work. Secondly, "that if one advances confidently in the direction

of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours ; in proportion as he simplifies his life the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness." He had put his transcendental philosophy to the test, and the result had not disappointed him ; he was no longer the "parcel of vain strivings" which he had pictured himself in his youthful poem, but he had now firm ground beneath his feet, and a clear object towards which to direct his course in the future.

On 6th September 1847 he left Walden, and again took up his residence in his father's household at Concord. "I left the woods," he says, "for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one." "Why did I leave the woods?" he wrote in his journal a few years later. "I do not think that I can tell. I do not know any better how I came to go there. I have often wished myself back. Perhaps I wanted change. There was a little stagnation, it may be, about two o'clock in the afternoon. Perhaps if I lived there much longer, I might live there for ever. One might think twice before he accepted heaven on such terms." So he quitted this heaven of transcendental seclusion, to return to the purgatory of village

society. The hut in which he had spent so many pleasant hours became the habitation of a Scotch gardener; a few years later it was bought by a farmer, and removed to another quarter of the Concord township, where it was used as a small granary and tool-house till some time after the death of its architect and original inhabitant.

Walden, the most famous of Thoreau's volumes, which contains the account of his life in the woods, was not published till 1854. That this most characteristic episode of his life, which, as Emerson observes, "was quite native and fit for him," should be a cause of wonder and misunderstanding to the majority of his readers and fellow-citizens, was, perhaps, only to be expected. Mention is made in one of the later diaries of an acquaintance of Emerson's who was much interested in *Walden*, but who was convinced that the book was nothing more than a satire and *jeu d'esprit*, written solely for the amusement of the passing moment,—a misconception of the whole spirit of Thoreau's life, which is scarcely more wide of the mark than are some of the judgments passed on the Walden experiment in more recent criticism. "His shanty life," says Mr. Lowell, "was a mere impossibility, so far as his own conception of it goes, as an entire independency of mankind. The tub of Diogenes had a sounder bottom."¹ But

¹ The author of the article on Thoreau in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* falls into a similar error, when he states that Thoreau was

there is not the slightest indication that Thoreau was thinking of an "entire independency of mankind"; he was simply adopting a more independent way of living than that which custom enjoins. And even this was only temporary and personal; he expressly disclaims any wish "to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures who will mind their own affairs," and merely begs his readers to accept such portions of his story as apply to them. The humour which is everywhere mingled with the seriousness of the Walden episode ought to preserve it from the absurdity of a strictly literal interpretation, though, as an example and experiment, its serious import is also unmistakable enough. The fact that this enterprise of Thoreau's, as described in his *Walden*, has been an encouragement and help to many persons, both in America and England, to live a simpler and saner life, is of itself sufficient testimony to the success of his endeavours.¹

It is necessary, however, if we would understand Thoreau aright, to appreciate carefully the importance of his sojourn at Walden in relation to the rest of his career. It seems to be sometimes forgotten that the period of his retirement was only two years out of the twenty of his adult life,

"desirous of proving to himself and others that man could be as independent of mankind as the nest-building bird." So, too, Prof. Nichol, in his *American Literature*.

¹ The true significance of Thoreau's retirement to Walden is well brought out in *Thoreau, his Life and Aims*, by H. A. Page.

and that it is therefore an injustice to him to connect his work too exclusively with Walden, or to speak of that episode as containing the sum and substance of his philosophical belief. It was a time of self-probation rather than an attempt to influence others, a trial rather than an expression of his transcendental ideas ; he was under thirty years of age when he went to Walden, had published no volumes, and was altogether unknown except to a limited circle of his fellow-townsmen. On the other hand, it must be noted that this was the time when his thoughts ripened, and his ethical creed assumed a definite form, and that his residence in the woods was not only the most striking, because the most picturesque, incident in his life, but also gave a determining direction to his later career. He was a student when he came to Walden ; when he returned to Concord he was a teacher.

And now, at this critical point in Thoreau's story, it may be well to interrupt for a time the external narrative of his life, in order to show what manner of man he was, in appearance, character, sympathies, studies, and other personal traits, when he thus came forward to preach to an inattentive world his ideal gospel of Simplicity.

CHAPTER V

PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER

THE personality of Thoreau was one which seldom failed to arrest the attention of those who met him. "He was short of stature," says a writer who visited him a few years after he left Walden,¹ "well built, and such a man as I have fancied Julius Cæsar to have been. Every movement was full of courage and repose; the tones of his voice were those of Truth herself; and there was in his eye the pure bright blue of the New England sky, as there was sunshine in his flaxen hair. He had a particularly strong aquiline Roman nose, which somehow reminded me of the prow of a ship." This description is fully corroborated by that given by Ellery Channing, who, from his long and intimate acquaintance with Thoreau, could speak with peculiar authority. "His face, once seen, could not be forgotten. The features were quite marked: the nose aquiline, or very Roman, like one of the portraits of Cæsar (more

¹ Moncure Conway, *Fraser*, April 1866.

like a beak, as was said); large overhanging brows above the deepest-set blue eyes that could be seen, in certain lights, and in others gray—eyes expressive of all shades of feeling, but never weak or near-sighted; the forehead not unusually broad or high, full of concentrated energy or purpose; the mouth with prominent lips, pursed up with meaning and thought when silent, and giving out when open a stream of the most varied and unusual and instructive sayings. His whole figure had an active earnestness, as if he had no moment to waste. Even in the boat he had a wary, transitory air, his eyes on the outlook—perhaps there might be ducks, or the Blondin turtle, or an otter, or sparrow.” From 1840 to 1860 Thoreau’s figure must have been a very familiar one to his fellow-townsmen of Concord, since he was abroad in all weathers and at all hours, a noticeable man with his sloping shoulders, “his eyes bent on the ground, his long swinging gait, his hands perhaps clasped behind him, or held closely at his side, the fingers made into a fist.” The indomitable spirit that animated his whole character was written unmistakably in his personal appearance. “How deep and clear is the mark that thought sets upon a man’s face!” was the exclamation of one who saw him for the first time.

The homeliness of Thoreau’s mode of dress has already been noticed, and this, during his more lengthy walks or excursions, often led to strange errors as to his object and vocation. In Cape Cod

and elsewhere he was several times mistaken for a pedlar, and on board a steamboat on the Hudson river he was once asked for a "chaw o' baccy" by a bystander, who took him for a shipmate. It is said that his speech "had always a *burr* in it," owing to his peculiar pronunciation of the letter *r*; but all his oddities of appearance and manner were soon forgotten under the singular charm of his conversation, the power of which is attested by all who knew him. He himself says, in a passage of his diary, that his *bon-mots* were the "ripe, dry fruit of long past experience," which fell from him easily without giving him either pain or pleasure. This experience was not gathered, as is usually the case, by foreign travel or a varied manner of life, but by shrewd native sense and keen practical insight. There was a wonderful fitness, Emerson tells us, between his body and mind. He was expert as a walker, swimmer, runner, rower, and in all outdoor employments; he could measure any given distance or height by foot or eye with extraordinary precision, could estimate the exact weight of anything put into his hands, and from a box containing a bushel or more of loose pencils could take up just a dozen pencils at every grasp.

He has sometimes been called an ascetic; but if he seldom used flesh or wine, tea or coffee, and other supposed "necessaries" of diet, this abstinence was assuredly due to the fact that he found he thus increased, rather than diminished, the pleasure of

existence. The rare delicacy of his nature showed itself in his abhorrence of every form of sensuality or grossness, and in his expressed desire to live "as tenderly and daintily as one would pluck a flower." Yet seldom has there been a greater lover of healthy physical life; "we need pray for no higher heaven," he says, "than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life." The keenness of his senses was extraordinary, and the perceptions of colour, sound, smell, and taste are always spoken of in his diaries as luxuries for which he can never be sufficiently grateful. "Colour," says Channing, "was a treat to Thoreau; he saw the seasons and the landscapes through their colours; and all hours, and fields, and woods spoke in varied hues, which impressed him with sentiment." "God's voice," says Thoreau, "is but a clear bell sound. I drink in a wonderful health, a cordial, in sound. The effect of the slightest tinkling in the horizon measures my own soundness. I thank God for sound. I think I will not trouble myself for any wealth when I can be so cheaply enriched." Music had at all times a peculiar attraction for him (he was himself a skilful player on the flute), and is repeatedly mentioned in the diaries and letters as one of the supreme delights of life. The musical-box, given him by Richard Fuller, an old college friend, was a great pleasure to him, as we have seen from some passages in his letters. "I could go about the world," he says, "listening for the strains of music." And again: "When I hear music I fear

no danger ; I am invulnerable ; I see no foe ; I am related to the earliest times, and to the latest. I hear music below ; it washes the dust off my life and everything I look at. The field of my life becomes a boundless plain, glorious to tread, with no death or disappointment at the end of it." The faint musical hum of the telegraph wires along the railroad which he often used as a pathway is the subject of several passages in the journal. "When the telegraph harp trembles and wavers, I am most affected, as if it were approaching to articulation. It sports so with my heart-strings. When the harp dies away a little, then I revive for it. It cannot be too faint. I almost envy the Irish whose shanty in the Cut is so near that they can hear this music daily, standing at their door." So, too, of the other senses. "Me-thinks," he writes in the journal, "that I possess the sense of smell in greater perfection than usual, and have the habit of smelling every plant I pluck." And again, in *Walden*, "I have been thrilled to think that I owed a mental perception to the commonly gross sense of taste, that I have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I had eaten on a hill-side had fed my genius."

But, if we wish to discover the central and distinctive quality of Thoreau's character, we must look beyond the above-mentioned faculties to the inner secret of his power—the ideality that dominated all his thoughts and actions. He was a transcendentalist in a far deeper and more literal sense than

the majority of those who bore that name. This point is admirably stated by Emerson in his brief memoir :

“ His robust sense, armed with stout hands, keen perceptions, and strong will, cannot yet account for the superiority which shone in his simple and hidden life. I must add the cardinal fact that there was an excellent wisdom in him, proper to a rare class of men, which showed him the material world as a means and symbol. This discovery, which sometimes yields to poets a certain casual and interrupted light, serving for the ornament of their writing, was in him an unsleeping insight ; and whatever faults or obstructions of temperament might cloud it, he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. This was the muse and genius that ruled his opinions, conversation, studies, work, and course of life. This made him a searching judge of men. At first glance he measured his companion, and though insensible to some fine traits of culture, could very well report his weight and calibre. And this made the impression of genius which his conversation often gave.”

It was this uncompromising ideality that gave to his character a certain external coldness and remoteness. “ I love Henry,” said one of his friends, “ but I cannot like him ; and as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree.” The misunderstandings thus generated were keenly felt by Thoreau himself, who rightly attributes them to his own extreme sensibility and exacting disposition. “ If I have not succeeded in my friendships,” he says in his journal,¹ “ it was because I demanded more of them, and did not put up with what I could get ; and I got no more partly

¹ 1st February 1852.

because I gave so little. I must be dumb to those who do not, as I believe, appreciate my actions, not knowing the springs of them." There are a number of such passages in the diaries (perhaps not to be taken very literally), in which his over-sensitive nature seems to be tormented by unnecessary doubts as to his relations with his friends, and this rigid strictness of ideal is especially observable in his essays on Love and Friendship, the latter of which forms a portion of one of the best-known chapters in the *Week*. It has been suggested, however, with a certain amount of probability, that the tone of Thoreau's utterances on this subject was largely affected by his own early disappointment in love, and that his stoical discourse on Friendship was in reality "an anodyne to lull his pains."¹ It is only fair to add that Ellery Channing, who, as Thoreau's most intimate friend, should be an authority on this point, asserts positively that the essay on Friendship was "poetical and romantic," and that to read it literally would be to accuse its author of stupidity. "The living actual friendship and affection," says Channing, "which makes time a reality, no one knew better. He meant friendship, and meant nothing else, and stood by it without the slightest abatement." How deeply Thoreau valued the society of true friends is also apparent from his own words. "What a difference, whether in all

¹ Mr. R. L. Stevenson : Preface to *Men and Books*.

your walks you meet only strangers, or in one house is one who knows you, and whom you know. To have a brother or a sister! To have a gold mine on your farm! To find diamonds in the gravel-heaps before your door! How rare these things are!" Thus it was that the very value which Thoreau set on his friendships was his chief difficulty in maintaining them, their rarity being to him the measure of their worth; so that, with a few exceptions, he turned to nature for what he could not find in man. "If I am too cold," he says, "for human friendships, I trust I shall not be too cold for natural influences. It appears to be a law that you cannot have a deep sympathy with both man and nature. Those qualities which bring you near to the one estrange you from the other." It has been well said of Thoreau that his affections were deep but not expansive.

What has been said of Thoreau's capacity for friendship holds good also of his general capacity for social intercourse; it has been remarked by Emerson that "the severity of his ideal interfered to deprive him of a healthy sufficiency of human society." Himself animated by a dauntless spirit of independence and self-help, he could scarcely sympathise with the foibles and weaknesses of ordinary men and women, nor feel pity for the petty sufferings and ailments that resulted therefrom. We are told by Channing that "he wasted none of his precious jewels, his moments, upon epistles to the class of

Rosa Matilda invalids, some of whom, like leeches, fastened upon his horny cuticle, but did not draw"; he was convinced that men had no miseries to complain of "except those of indigestion and laziness, manufactured to their own order." If he appeared at times cold and unsympathetic, it was because he viewed life from a different standpoint from that of the average man. "My acquaintances," he says, "sometimes imply that I am too cold, but each thing is warm enough for its kind. Cold! I am most sensible of warmth in winter days. It is not that I am too cold, but that our warmth and coldness are not of the same nature. Hence when I am absolutely warmest, I may be coldest to you." In nature Thoreau could enjoy the warmth and comfort of which his neighbours imagined him to be destitute; the wildness of nature was "a kind of thoroughwort and boneset" to his intellect. Finding, therefore, that ordinary society was "not often so instructive" as the silence it broke, he preferred to spend his leisure time in the forests and meadows. "It is as if I always met in those places some grand, serene, immortal, infinitely encouraging, though invisible, companion, and walked with him. There, at last, my nerves are steadied, my senses and my mind do their office." While admitting the limitations of Thoreau's character, one cannot avoid the conviction that in thus courting solitude in preference to society he was following the inevitable bent of his natural genius.

To a man of this temperament, who needed leisure, breathing-space, and elbow-room, and could not endure to be shut up in polite drawing-rooms and dining-rooms, where the guests jostled each other, mentally and bodily, and where all true individuality was hidden and wasted, the frivolities and formalities of conventional society could not be otherwise than a burden and an irritant. Under such conditions he became contradictory and pugnacious, and marred the course of conversation by the promptitude with which he negated every proposition that might be advanced, most of all when he detected any signs of hypocrisy, foppishness, or dilettantism. "His mental appearance," says Channing, "at times almost betrayed irritability; his words were like quills on the fretful porcupine. Like a cat, he would curl up his spine and spit at a fop or monkey, and despised those who were running well downhill to damnation." He had an especial dislike for the cant of self-seeking reformers and self-styled philanthropists, who would not keep their distance, but rubbed their neighbours "with the greasy cheek of their kindness," and has put on record an inimitable description of one of these gentry whose acquaintance he made in his father's house at Concord. "It was difficult to keep clear of the slimy benignity with which he sought to cover you, before he took you fairly into his bowels. He addressed me as Henry within one minute from the first time I laid eyes on him; and when I spoke,

he said with sultry, drawling sympathy, 'Henry, I know all you would say, I understand you perfectly; you need not explain anything to me.'" The sharp sayings, and still more "accusing silences," as Emerson terms them, which Thoreau dealt out to all pretentious personages, had, of course, the effect of getting him the reputation of cynicism and misanthropy; those readers, however, who rightly appreciate his character, will distinguish between the normal churlishness, which certainly was not one of his failings, and the occasional acridity of speech which he deliberately adopted in his intercourse with his fellow-citizens. "If he had any affectation in his sincere and aspiring nature," writes one who knew him well,¹ "it was a sort of inherited petulance, that covered a sensitive and affectionate nature, easily wounded by the scornful criticism which his new departure sometimes brought upon him." "I do not wish to flatter my townsmen," says Thoreau in *Walden*, "nor to be flattered by them, for that will not advance either of us; we need to be provoked—goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot." By the habit of applying this intellectual stimulus to sluggish minds, he was too often led into exaggerated and paradoxical statements—a danger which he himself noticed and deplored. "My companion tempts me to certain licences of speech, to reckless and sweeping expressions, which

¹ Mr. Edward Hoar, of Concord.

I am wont to regret that I have used. I find that I have used more harsh, extravagant, and cynical expressions concerning mankind and individuals than I intended. I find it difficult to make to him a sufficiently moderate statement. I think it is because I have not his sympathy in my sober and constant view. He asks for a paradox, an eccentric statement, and too often I give it him."

To style Thoreau a misanthrope is to misunderstand his whole nature, and to do him a great injustice. He loved to study all forms of innocent and healthy character, and in one of his works he quotes, as specially applicable to himself, Terence's famous maxim of regard for our common humanity. "I love," he says in the *Week*, "to see the herd of men feeding heartily on coarse and succulent pleasures, as cattle on the husks and stalks of vegetables. Though there are many crooked and crabbed specimens of humanity among them, run all to thorn and rind, and crowded out of shape by adverse circumstances, yet fear not that the race will fail or waver in them." Had Thoreau been the mere fastidious recluse that some critics have supposed him, he could not have drawn his sympathetic and humorous sketches of the sturdy Concord farmers, or of the hearty unsophisticated wood-chopper by whom he was visited at Walden, or of the aged brown-coated fisherman who haunted the banks of the Musketaquid, or of the drunken Dutchman on board a New York steamboat, or of the merry old oysterman who

gave him hospitality at Cape Cod. For idealist and enthusiast though he was, he possessed a true vein of humour, which is none the less piquant because it is expressed in a manner so dry, pithy, and laconic. It is pleasant, too, to note that the gravity which was habitual with the hermit and philosopher could melt, when occasion arose, into merriment and good-fellowship, and that when he laughed "the operation was sufficient to split a pitcher." He was fond of playing on his flute, and would at times sing "Tom Bowling" and other nautical songs with much gusto and animation; and it is even recorded that he once or twice startled his friends by performing an improvised dance.

Reference has already been made to his sympathy with children, and his remarkable power of interesting and amusing them. He would tell them stories, sing to them, and play on his flute, or perform various pieces of jugglery for their entertainment—an accomplishment which he had probably learnt from his eccentric uncle, Charles Dunbar, in whose oddities he always took much interest. But it was in the huckleberry expeditions that his services were in greatest request, for then he would drive the hay-cart in which the children journeyed to the hills where the berries abounded,—and who knew each knoll and dingle so intimately as Thoreau?—"leading the frolic with his jokes and laughter as they jolted along." When we read the delightful accounts of his kindness and helpfulness

on these occasions, we know how to estimate the charges of misanthropy and churlishness. "Though shy of general society," says the writer of the reminiscences in *Fraser*, "Thoreau was a hero among children, and the captain of their excursions. He was the *sine qua non* of the Concord huckleberry party, which is in that region something of an institution. To have Thoreau along with them was to be sure of finding acres of bushes laden with the delicious fruit. . . . A child stumbles and falls, losing his carefully gathered store of berries; Thoreau kneels beside the weeping unfortunate, and explains to him and to the group that nature has made these little provisions for next year's crop. If there were no obstacles, and little boys did not fall occasionally, how would berries be scattered and planted? and what would become of huckleberrings? He will then arrange that he who has thus suffered for the general good shall have the first chance at the next pasture."

The severity of Thoreau's ideal was not less conspicuous in matters of business than in his relations towards his friends. He was absolutely and austere faithful to his inner sense of right, keeping his engagements with stern regularity, and never failing in the full discharge of his duty to those who engaged him as surveyor or handicraftsman, laying out, as Channing expresses it, "every molecule of fidelity upon his employer's interests." Himself thus inflexible in his probity, he expected and

exacted a corresponding uprightness in others ; and where this was not exhibited, he made no polite pretence of concealing his dissatisfaction. "He was a man," says John Burroughs,¹ "so thoroughly devoted to principle and to his own aims in life, that he seems never to have allowed himself one indifferent or careless moment ; he was always making the highest demands upon himself and upon others." No meanness, hypocrisy, or dishonesty, whether on the part of rich or poor, could escape the rigorous censure of "that terrible Thoreau," as his acquaintances called him ; nor would he waste on thriftless applicants one cent of the money which he had earned by his own conscientious labours. He maintained sincerity to be the chief of all virtues. "The old mythology," he wrote, "is incomplete without a god or a goddess of sincerity, on whose altars we might offer up all the products of our farms, our workshops, and our studies. This is the only panacea."

"A Yankee stoic" is a term that has been happily applied to Thoreau. Though cosmopolitan in his philosophical views, he was American to the backbone in sentiment and manner, and did not study to conceal his indifference or aversion for English and European fashions. He possessed in large measure the American qualities of self-consciousness and self-assertion, and avows in *Walden*

¹ *The Century*, July 1882.

his intention "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning," in order to wake up his neighbours. "As a true patriot," he says elsewhere, "I should be ashamed to think that Adam in Paradise was more favourably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman in this country." And as America was the most favoured of countries, so did he extol his native Concord as the most favoured of towns. This preference, however, was not due, as some have supposed, to mere parochialism and narrowness of mind—for parochialism, the study of the little instead of the great, was certainly not one of Thoreau's failings—but was, as Emerson has pointed out, a half-serious half-humorous way of reasserting the old stoical maxim that all places are the same to a wise man, and that "the best place for each is where he stands." On the same principle, being asked at table what dish he preferred, he is said to have answered, "The nearest."

Not even the suspicion of provincial prejudice can attach to Thoreau's literary tastes. It is true that his earnest practical mind could not relish the subtleties of metaphysical works, the dulness of moral treatises, or the floweriness of romance; and he was usually averse to reading the magazines and journals of the day, the "news" in which he was interested being other than that which newspapers report. But he read largely and widely nevertheless, and his discrimination never deteriorated into fastidiousness and partiality. The class

of books which he most highly valued was undoubtedly the "sacred scriptures," as he calls them, of the poets and philosophers of Persia and India—the Bhagvat Geeta, Vishnu Sarma, Laws of Menu, Saadi, and other "bibles" of the old Oriental religions. These he studied chiefly in French and German translations, which he accumulated with such zeal that he is said to have had the best library of such books in the country; and this was supplemented, in 1855, by a handsome present of volumes in English, French, Latin, Greek, and Sanscrit, sent him by Mr. Cholmondeley, a young English friend. There are numerous citations from these ancient writings in Thoreau's own works, and so great was his reverence for them that he jealously asserted their claim to the title of "scriptures" in common with those of Jewish origin. When a young visitor from Harvard College informed him that he was studying "the Scriptures" Thoreau quickly retorted, "But *which*?" "It would be worthy of the age," he says in his *Week*, "to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindoos, the Persians, the Hebrews, and others, as the Scripture of mankind. Such a juxtaposition and comparison might help to liberalise the faith of men. This would be the Bible, or Book of Books, which let the missionaries carry to the uttermost parts of the earth."

Thoreau's classical studies were not confined to his early years, but were fully maintained in after-life, Homer, Æschylus, Virgil, and the poets of the Greek Anthology being his chief favourites. Classical learning is eulogised in both the *Week* and *Walden*, as being the most heroic and tranquillising of all branches of reading. "I know of no studies so composing as those of the classical scholar. When we have sat down to them, life seems as still and serene as if it were very far off, and I believe it is not habitually seen from any common platform so truly and unexaggerated as in the light of literature." "The value of the classic languages," says one who knew Thoreau well,¹ "was never better exemplified than in their influence on his training. They were real 'humanities' to him, linking him with the great memories of the race, and with high intellectual standards, so that he could never, like some of his imitators, treat literary art as a thing unmanly and trivial. I remember how that fine old classical scholar, the late John Glen King, of Salem, used to delight in Thoreau as being 'the only man who thoroughly loved both nature and Greek.'" His reading in Greek and Latin included not only the "classics" proper, but many old-fashioned authorities on agriculture and natural history, such as Aristotle, Ælian, Theophrastus, Cato, Varro, and Pliny.

¹ T. Wentworth Higginson : *Short Studies of American Authors*.

His respect for Linnæus was, according to Channing, "transcendent." He furthermore loved to study Froissart and the old-fashioned chronicles, and such voyages as those of Drake and Purchas, with any books of travel that came in his way. Among poets the old English worthies were most to his liking; he read and appreciated old ballad-writers, Chaucer, Spenser, Ossian, Herbert, Cowley, Quarles, and, above all others, Milton, whose "Lycidas" was often on his lips. For modern writers he cared comparatively little, the chief exceptions being Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Ruskin, and Carlyle. He admired Ruskin, but thought him somewhat bigoted, finding in him, as he expressed it, "too much about art for me and the Hottentots." For Carlyle he felt and expressed the sincerest admiration, as may be seen in the essay which he contributed to *Graham's Magazine* in 1847. He was, if Emerson's verdict may be trusted, a good reader and critic. "He would pass by many delicate rhythms, but he would have detected every live stanza or line in a volume, and knew very well where to find an equal poetic charm in prose." All his reading was done with a pen or pencil in his hand, and he had separate notebooks in which to jot down either facts or poetry.

There was another and wholly different branch of reading to which Thoreau devoted a considerable portion of his time—the records of the native

Indian tribes, which he extracted with much labour and research from the histories of the Jesuit missionaries, the early New England chroniclers, and various other sources of information. Everything connected with the Indians had a strange interest and fascination for him; he noted and admired their natural instinct of woodcraft, their immobility and self-possession, and their mysterious sense of remoteness to the white man; he several times visited Maine in order to study their language and habits, and never failed to converse with the wandering parties who sometimes pitched their tents for a few weeks on the banks of the Concord river. His collection of Indian relics had been commenced while he was still a youth, and the soil of Concord—an old settlement of Indian tribes—was rich in these treasures, arrow-heads, pottery, and stone implements being often turned up by the plough. Regularly every spring, when the fields had been washed bare by rains and thawing snow, would Thoreau set out to gather his crop of arrow-heads, and his extraordinary keenness of sight in detecting these relics was often a cause of wonder to less observant minds. "I do not see where you find your Indian arrow-heads," once remarked the companion of his walk. "Here is one," replied Thoreau on the instant, picking one up and presenting it to his astonished friend.

This remarkable sympathy, on the part of one

of the most advanced of modern thinkers, with the spirit of a savage and decaying race is accounted for by Thoreau's strong natural inclination to the uncultivated and wild. "There is in my nature," he avows, "a singular yearning to all wildness"; he saw in wildness the universal tonic of life, the "preservation of the world"; "life consists with wildness; the most alive is the wildest." He loved the sea and all desert places; preferred the wild apple to the cultured orchard, and the dreariest swamp to the most fragrant garden; and it cheered him to see the young forest-pines springing up anew in the fertile corn-land. The Indian, the human representative of wild life in New England, thus attracted his sympathies, just as the sympathies of George Borrow were attracted to the roaming gipsy tribes. "We talk of civilising the Indian," he says, "but that is not the name for his improvement. By the wary independence and aloofness of his dim forest life he preserves his intercourse with his native gods, and is admitted from time to time to a rare and peculiar society with nature."

This inclination of Thoreau to wild nature was not, as some critics have suggested, a symptom of an unhealthy temperament, but rather a method of retaining the excellent soundness of his mind. "His whole life," it has been said,¹ "was a search for the doctor." This was not the case. He went

¹ Mr. Lowell, in *My Study Windows*.

to nature, not as a sickly valetudinarian, seeking a cure for his ailments, but as a sane and healthy man, the secret of whose health lay in this very familiarity with the open air. Walking was a necessity of Thoreau's existence; he demanded four hours at least each day for sauntering at leisure over hills, and woods, and fields, taking short cuts when he could, and avoiding for the most part the grit and noise of the busier high-roads. The direction of his walks was usually, owing to some strange and indefinable attraction, towards the west or south-west, as at once the home of wildness and the goal of human migration; every sunset which he saw (and sunset was one of his habitual times for walking) inspired him with the desire to go to a West "as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down." The old Marlboro' road which led south-west from Concord, through a spacious tract of open country abounding in patches of scrub-oak and wild apples, was one of his favourite haunts; so, too, were Walden woods and the "Cliffs" which overhang Fairhaven, the wide bay formed by a bend of the river two miles south of the village. The river was much frequented by him at all seasons of the year; for in summer he made almost daily voyages in his boat, which he kept moored in Ellery Channing's riverside garden, and in winter the frozen stream offered a convenient pathway. "Not till winter," he says, "can we take possession of the whole of our terri-

tory. I have three great highways ranging out from one centre which is near my door. I may walk down the main river, or up either of its two branches. With the river I am not compelled to walk in the tracks of horses." The Ponds, especially Walden and White Ponds, were another constant attraction ; his fondness for the shore of White Pond has been commemorated in some lines by Ellery Channing :

"One whom often here glad Nature found
Seated beneath yon thorn, or on the ground
Poring content, when frosty Autumn bore
Of wilding fruit to earth that bitter store ;
And when the building winter spanned in ice
Thy trembling limbs, soft lake ! then each device
Traced in white figures on thy seamed expanse
This child of problems caught in gleeful trance.
Oh, welcome he to thrush and various jay,
And echoing veery, period of the day !
To each clear hyla trilling the new spring,
And late gray goose buoyed on his icy wing ;
Bold walnut-buds admire the gentle hand,
While the shy sassafras their rings expand
On his approach, and thy green forest wave,
White Pond ! to him fraternal greetings gave.
The far white clouds that fringe the topmost pine
For his delight their fleecy folds decline ;
The sunset worlds melted their ore for him,
And lightning touched his thought to seraphim.
Clear wave, thou wert not vainly made, I know,
Since this sweet man of Nature thee could owe
A genial hour, and hope that flies afar,
And revelations from thy guiding star."

On these expeditions Thoreau was generally unaccompanied, unless Ellery Channing or one of

his few chosen friends happened to be with him. Offers of companionship were not rarely forthcoming, but these he for the most part declined with that frankness which was all his own. "Would he not walk with them?" some acquaintances would ask. "He did not know; there was nothing so important to him as his walk; he had no walks to throw away on company." But for those who succeeded in gaining this privilege a rare treat was assured. "His powers of conversation," says one who was thus favoured,¹ "were extraordinary. I remember being surprised and delighted at every step with revelations of laws and significant attributes in common things. . . . The acuteness of his senses was marvellous; no hound could scent better, and he could hear the most faint and distant sound without even laying his ear to the ground like an Indian. As we penetrated farther and farther into the woods he seemed to gain a certain transformation, and his face shone with a light that I had not seen in the village." The account of Thoreau's skilful and genial leadership of the Concord huckleberry-parties has already been quoted, and from the same authority we have an equally charming description of how he would guide his friends to the haunts of the water-lily.² "Upon such occasions his resources for our entertainment were inexhaustible. He would tell stories of the Indians who once dwelt thereabouts,

¹ Moncure Conway, *Fraser*, April 1866.

² *Ibid.*

till the children almost looked to see a red man skulking with his arrow on shore; and every plant or flower on the bank or in the water, and every fish, turtle, frog, lizard about us, was transformed by the wand of his knowledge from the low form into which the spell of our ignorance had reduced it, into a mystic beauty. One of his surprises was to thrust his hand softly into the water, and as softly raise up before our astonished eyes a large bright fish, which lay as contentedly in his hand as if they were old acquaintances."

His extraordinary sympathy with animals was one of the most singular and pleasing features in Thoreau's character. Like St. Francis, he felt a sense of love and brotherhood towards the lower races, and regarded them not as brute beasts, without sensibility or soul, but as possessing "the character and importance of another order of men." He protested against the conceited self-assurance with which man sets down the intelligence of animals as mere "instinct," while overlooking their real wisdom and fitness of behaviour. They were his "townsmen and fellow-creatures," whose individuality must be recognised as much as his own, and who must be treated with courtesy and gentleness. "There was in his face and expression," says Mr. Conway, "a kind of intellectual furtiveness; no wild thing could escape him more than it could be harmed by him. The gray huntsman's suit which he wore enhanced this expression. . . . The cruellest

weapons of attack, however, which this huntsman took with him were a spy-glass for birds, a microscope for the game that would hide in smallness, and an old book in which to press plants."

The strange influence which Thoreau was able to exercise over beasts, and birds, and fish was doubtless chiefly due to the power of his humane sympathy, partly, also, to his habits of patient silence and watchfulness, in which he resembled the hermits of the Middle Ages. Emerson tells us that "he knew how to sit immovable, a part of the rock he rested on, until the bird, the reptile, the fish, which had retired from him, should come back and resume its habits, nay, moved by curiosity, should come to him and watch him." His hut at Walden was inhabited by other creatures besides himself; the birds would flit fearlessly through the room; the red squirrel raced over the roof, while moles and hares stabled in the cellar; and chickadees perched on the armfuls of wood which he carried across his threshold. Once, as he was hoeing in a garden, a sparrow alighted on his shoulder, which he regarded as "a greater honor than any epaulet he could have worn." Nor was this all, for his mingled firmness and sympathy enabled him to take all sorts of liberties with the wildest of wild creatures. "Snakes coiled round his leg, the fishes swam into his hand, and he took them out of the water; he pulled the woodchuck out of its hole by the tail, and took the

foxes under his protection from the hunters.”¹ A story is told how a squirrel, which he had taken home for a few days in order to observe its habits, refused to be set at liberty, returning again and again to its new friend with embarrassing persistence, climbing up his knee, sitting on his hand, and at last gaining the day by hiding its head in the folds of his waistcoat—an appeal which Thoreau was not able to withstand.

Thoreau was essentially a “poet-naturalist,” as Ellery Channing entitled him, and not a man of science. He was, indeed, an honorary member and correspondent of the Boston Natural History Society; but he declined, as a rule, to write memoirs of his experiences in this branch of study, on the ground that he could not properly detach the mere external record of observation from the inner associations with which such facts were connected in his mind—in a word, the natural history of the subject could not be separated from the poetry and idealism. His whole method, as we have seen, was different from that of the scientific anatomist; he observed but he did not kill, making it his object to hold his bird “in the affections” rather than in the hand. His diaries testify to the immense diligence and keenness of his communion with nature, and his unflagging interest in the seasons and all they bring with them. “As a child

¹ *Memoir*, by R. W. Emerson.

looks forward to the coming of the summer, so could we contemplate with quiet joy the circle of the seasons returning without fail eternally." He noted and recorded the habits of animals, the tracks of the fox and otter, the migrations and song of birds, the croak of frogs and chirp of crickets, the spawning and nests of fishes, the blossoming of flowers, the fall of leaves, the height of the river, the temperature of ponds and springs, and innumerable other phenomena of outdoor life. Like all true naturalists, he loved birds, and many are the entries in his journal respecting the kinds that are native at Concord—the bobolink, the robin, the song-sparrow, the whip-poor-will, the cat-bird, and the blue-bird, which, as he beautifully said of it, "carries the sky on its back." He loved to be awakened in the early summer mornings by the song of birds, and nothing cheered him so much in the midst of a winter storm as a bird's chirp or whistle. Other favourite creatures were the bull-frog and the little "peeping hyla"; while the huge snapping-turtle, the eggs of which he sometimes hatched in his yard, was, in Channing's phrase, "his pride and consolation." "If Iliads are not composed in our day," said Thoreau, "snapping-turtles are hatched and arrive at maturity."

The neighbourhood of Concord, with its wide tracts of meadow and woodland, was a fine field for the naturalist; and Thoreau, in his characteristic love of paradox, was fond of asserting that it sur-

passed all other places as a centre of observation—a foible for which he was gently bantered by Emerson. He talked about nature, it was wittily remarked, “as if she had been born and brought up at Concord.” *Ne quid quæsieris extra te Concordiamque* was his humorous maxim. He contended that all the important plants of America were included in the flora of Massachusetts, and after reading Kane’s *Arctic Voyage* he expressed his conviction that most of the Arctic phenomena might be noted at Concord—an assertion which he partly substantiated by the discovery of red snow and one or two Labrador plants.¹ He had thoughts of constructing a complete calendar for the natural phenomena of Concord, and believed that if he waked up from a trance the time of year would be as plain to him from the plants as the time of day from a dial. Of all flowers the water-lily was his favourite, but there were none that he did not know and love; even the growth of the sturdy aboriginal weeds gave him a sense of satisfaction. He often

¹ There is an entry in the journal for 20th January 1857 which well illustrates this whim of Thoreau’s. “At R. W. E.’s this evening I was called out to see E.’s cave in the snow. It was a hole about two and a half feet wide and six feet long, in a drift, a little winding, and he had got a lamp at the inner extremity. . . . What was most surprising to me, when E. crawled into the extremity of his cave, and shouted at the top of his voice, it sounded ridiculously faint, as if he were a quarter of a mile off. The voice was in fact muffled by the surrounding snow walls, and I saw that we might lie in that hole screaming for assistance in vain, while travellers were passing along twenty feet distant. So you need only make a snow-house in your yard and pass an hour in it to realise a good deal of Esquimaux life.”

walked miles to note the condition of some rare tree or shrub, and congratulated himself that the time thus spent was more profitably laid out than in a good many social visits. "On one occasion," says a friend who visited him at Concord, "he mentioned the *hibiscus* beside the river—a rare flower in New England—and when I desired to see it, told me it would open 'about Monday and not stay long.' I went on Tuesday afternoon and was a day too late—the petals lay on the ground."

Such were the points in Thoreau's personality which made him an object of interest and wonder from the first to his own friends and acquaintances, and afterwards to a far wider circle. We can well believe that a man gifted with such an intense and genuine individuality often found himself, as Emerson tells us, in "dramatic situations," and that in any debatable matter there was no person whose judgment was awaited by his townsmen with keener expectation. As his fame spread he gained an increasing number of admiring friends, some of whom travelled long distances to see and converse with him. "I have repeatedly known young men of sensibility," says Emerson, "converted in a moment to the belief that this was the man they were in search of, the man of men, who could tell them all they should do."

CHAPTER VI

LITERARY LIFE AT CONCORD

IN the autumn of 1847, shortly after leaving the hut at Walden, Thoreau again took up his residence at Emerson's house, and lived there a year during his friend's absence in Europe, in order to keep Mrs. Emerson company and take charge of the garden. He was in the habit of assisting Mr. Alcott in garden work on his estate at "Hillside," and in 1847 the two friends and fellow-workmen had built Emerson a summer-house, to be used as a study. Early in October Thoreau accompanied Emerson to Boston to see him start on his voyage, and in a letter to his sister Sophia he feelingly described the appearance and dimensions of the philosopher's cabin, and how, instead of a walk in Walden woods, he would be compelled to promenade on deck, "where the few trees, you know, are stripped of their bark." Emerson, on his part, was not forgetful of Thoreau's interests during his visit to England, and we find him planning, in 1848, a new joint American and English magazine,

to which Thoreau was to be one of the chief contributors. After Emerson's return to Concord in 1849 Thoreau lived at his father's house in the village, and this continued to be his home for the rest of his life.

He had now begun to consider literature his regular occupation, and it was as a writer and lecturer that he was henceforth chiefly known. We have seen that during his literary novitiate he had contributed articles (unpaid, for the most part) to the *Dial* and other journals; and in 1847, by the kind services of Horace Greeley, his essay on Carlyle was printed in *Graham's Magazine*. This was followed in 1849 by the essay on "Civil Disobedience," an expression of his anarchist views, which found place in the *Boston Æsthetic Papers*. In the spring of the same year he took a far more daring and important step by the publication of his first volume, the *Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, which was issued, at the author's expense, by Munroe, a Boston bookseller. The book was well reviewed, but did not sell, and the result was that Thoreau was compelled to raise money to pay off the debt by devoting his time for an unusually long period to the more remunerative but less congenial task of surveying. An edition of one thousand copies had been printed, and for several years the bulk of these lay idle on the publisher's shelves, until, in 1853, the remaining seven hundred volumes were returned *en masse* to

the author. This event is recorded by Thoreau in his characteristic vein of dry humour, and with a manly courage and self-reliance not to be surpassed in the history of literary authorship :

“The wares are sent to me at last, and I have an opportunity to examine my purchase. They are something more substantial than fame, as my back knows, which has borne them up two flights of stairs to a place similar to that to which they trace their origin. Of the remaining two hundred ninety and odd, seventy-five were given away, the rest sold. I have now a library of nearly nine hundred volumes, over seven hundred of which I wrote myself. Is it not well that the author should behold the fruits of his labour? My works are piled up in my chamber, half as high as my head, my *opera omnia*. This is authorship. These are the work of my brain. There was just one piece of good luck in the venture. The un-bound were tied up by the printer four years ago in stout paper wrappers, and inscribed ‘H. D. Thoreau’s Concord River, fifty copies.’ So Munroe had only to cross out ‘River’ and write ‘Mass.,’ and deliver them to the express-man at once. I can see now what I write for, and the result of my labors. Nevertheless, in spite of this result, sitting beside the inert mass of my works, I take up my pen to-night, to record what thought or experience I may have had, with as much satisfaction as ever. Indeed, I believe that this result is more inspiring and better than if a thousand had bought my wares. It affects my privacy less, and leaves me freer.”

That the *Week* should at first have failed to win the favour of any but a few sympathetic readers can hardly be a matter of surprise, since its intense idealism and strongly pantheistic tone were ill calculated to conciliate the ordinary American mind. Purporting to be a record of the trip made by the two brothers in 1839, it was in reality an out-

pouring of its author's ideal philosophy on a great variety of topics, a number of essays and poems (mostly reprints from the *Dial*) being interwoven, in the most arbitrary manner, with the thread of the nominal subject. The book is thus rendered vague, disjointed, and discursive; and is, moreover, almost arrogant in its transcendental egoism. Yet, with all its deficiencies, it has, and must ever have, a great and indefinable charm for the lovers of Thoreau's genius. Its very lack of cohesion and entire disregard of method contribute to enhance the effect of its poetical mysticism and brilliant descriptive power, while several of the discourses introduced into it—notably those on Friendship and Religion—are written in Thoreau's most admirable and telling style. Emerson calls it "a seven days' voyage, in as many chapters, pastoral as Izaak Walton, spicy as flag-root, broad and deep as Menu"; and adds that Thoreau read some of it to him one afternoon under an oak on the river-bank, and invigorated him by the reading. Curtis, too, has described it as "a book as redolent of genuine and perceptive sympathy with nature as a clover-field of honey."¹

In the autumn of 1849 Thoreau accompanied a friend on an excursion to the wild sandy tract

¹ The *Athenæum* of 27th October 1849 contained a brief notice of the *Week*. "The matter is for the most part poor enough," said the reviewer, "but there are a few things in the volume, scattered here and there, which suggest that the writer is a man with a habit of original thinking."

of Cape Cod, for which he conceived so great a liking that he visited it again on several occasions ; in like manner he spent a week in Canada, with Ellery Channing as his fellow-traveller, in September 1850. Each of these excursions provided material for a series of articles in *Putnam's Magazine* ; but both came to an abrupt conclusion owing to misunderstandings between author and publisher—a mishap to which Thoreau's outspoken tone and uncompromising temper made him peculiarly liable. His visit to the Maine Woods in 1846, which has already been alluded to, was described in the *Union Magazine* a year or two later ; and he again went to Maine in 1853 and 1857.¹ These occasional excursions were a great pleasure to Thoreau, as extending the circle of his observations, without putting any restriction on his freedom ; but he still resolutely declined to extend his travels to more distant regions, in spite of the offers he sometimes received from admirers and friends, who wished to take him round the world at their own cost. "I am afraid to travel much, or to famous places," he writes in his journal, "lest it might completely dissipate the mind. Then I am sure that what we observe at home, if we observe anything, is of more importance than what we observe abroad. The far-fetched is of least value. What we observe in

¹ For an account of these excursions, see chapter vii.

travelling are, to some extent, the accidents of the body ; what we observe when sitting at home are, in the same proportion, phenomena of the mind itself." In the same spirit he asserted that the sight of a marsh-hawk in the Concord meadows was of more value to him than the entry of the allies into Paris. It is easy to laugh at this deliberate concentration of thought on a particular locality ; but a study of Thoreau's life inclines one to believe that he gauged correctly the peculiar strength and the peculiar weakness of his shy, subtle, and sensitive genius.

The course of his life at Concord was singularly quiet and uneventful. Always an affectionate son and brother, he lived contentedly as a member of the household of his father, who, with Henry's assistance, had now built himself a dwelling of his own and was no longer a tenant. Thoreau's study was in the garret, where he stored his collections of birds' eggs, botanical specimens, and Indian relics, and carried on his literary work. His affectionate regard for his father was in no wise diminished by the dissimilarity of their characters, a contrast which is illustrated by one or two suggestive passages in the journal. On one occasion we find a protest made by the quiet, unobtrusive, but eminently practical old man against what he considered a waste of time on the part of his more imaginative son, who was busying himself in making sugar from a neighbouring maple-grove

when he could have bought it cheaper at the village shop. To his father's remark that it took him from his studies, Thoreau made the characteristic answer that it *was* his study, and that after being engaged in this pursuit he felt "as if he had been to a university." Mrs. Thoreau, who was of the same age as her husband, retained all her dramatic vivacity of demeanour, her liking for ribbons and finery, and her extraordinary power of talk. It is said that when his mother began to talk at table, Thoreau would patiently remain silent until she had finished, and then, with a courteous obeisance, resume the thread of his conversation at the point where it had been interrupted. In 1849 the family circle suffered a heavy loss in the death of Helen, Thoreau's elder sister, whose character, like that of the brother who died seven years earlier, was full of ability and promise.

It was about this time that Thoreau became acquainted with Mr. Harrison G. O. Blake, a clergyman and tutor residing at Worcester, Massachusetts, with whom he corresponded largely from 1848 onwards, chiefly on subjects connected with his ideal method of thought. The following are Mr. Blake's reminiscences of his friendly intercourse with Thoreau :

"I was introduced to him first by Mr. Emerson more than forty years ago, though I had known him by sight before at college. I recall nothing of that first interview unless it be some remarks upon astronomy, and his want of interest in the study

as compared with studies relating more directly to this world—remarks such as he has made here and there in his writings. My first real introduction was from the reading of an article of his in the *Dial* on 'Aulus Persius Flaccus,' which appears now in the *Week*. That led to my first writing to him, and to his reply, which is published in the volume of letters.¹ Our correspondence continued for more than twelve years, and we visited each other at times, he coming here to Worcester, commonly to read something in public, or being on his way to read somewhere else.

"As to the outward incidents of our intercourse, I think of little or nothing that it seems worth while to write. Our conversation, or rather his talking, when we were together, was in the strain of his letters and of his books. Our relation, as I look back on it, seems almost an impersonal one, and illustrates well his remark that 'our thoughts are the epochs in our lives; all else is but as a journal of the winds that blew while we were here.' His personal appearance did not interest me particularly, except as the associate of his spirit, though I felt no discord between them. When together, we had little inclination to talk of personal matters. His aim was directed so steadily and earnestly towards what is essential in our experience, that beyond all others of whom I have known, he made but a single impression on me. Geniality, versatility, personal familiarity are, of course, agreeable in those about us, and seem necessary in human intercourse, but I did not miss them in Thoreau, who was, while living, and is still in my recollection and in what he has left to us, such an effectual witness to what is highest and most precious in life. As I re-read his letters from time to time, which I never tire of doing, I am apt to find new significance in them, am still warned and instructed by them, with more force occasionally than ever before; so that in a sense they are still in the mail, have not

¹ In this letter, dated 27th March 1848, Thoreau says, "I am glad to hear that any words of mine, though spoken so long ago that I can hardly claim identity with their author, have reached you. It gives me pleasure, because I have therefore reason to suppose that I have uttered what concerns men, and that it is not in vain that man speaks to man. This is the value of literature."

altogether reached me yet, and will not probably before I die. They may well be regarded as addressed to those who can read them best."

Here are two passages from Thoreau's letters which throw light on the manner of his living and thinking, as compared with that of some of his neighbours at Concord. The first is addressed to Mr. Blake :

"20th Nov. 1849.—At present I am subsisting on certain wild flavors which nature wafts to me, which unaccountably sustain me, and make my apparently poor life rich. Within a year my walks have extended themselves, and almost every afternoon (I read, or write, or make pencils in the forenoon, and by the last means get a living for my body) I visit some new hill, or pond, or wood, many miles distant. I am astonished at the wonderful retirement through which I move, rarely meeting a man in these excursions ; never seeing one similarly engaged unless it be my companion, when I have one. I cannot help feeling that of all the human inhabitants of nature hereabouts, only we two have leisure to admire and enjoy our inheritance."

"13th July 1852.—Concord is just as idiotic as ever in relation to the spirits and their knockings. Most people here believe in a spiritual world which no respectable junk-bottle, which had not met with a slip, would condescend to contain even a portion of for a moment. . . . If I could be brought to believe in the things which they believe, I should make haste to get rid of my certificates of stock in this and the next world's enterprises, and buy a share in the first Immediate Annihilation Company that offered. I would exchange my immortality for a glass of small beer this hot weather. Where *are* the heathen? Was there ever any superstition before? And yet I suppose there may be a vessel this very moment setting sail from the coast of North America to that of Africa with a missionary on board! Consider the dawn and the sunrise—the rainbow and the evening—the words of Christ and the aspirations of all the saints! Hear

music! See, smell, taste, feel, hear—anything—and then hear these idiots, inspired by the cracking of a restless board, humbly asking, ‘Please, Spirit, if you cannot answer by knocks, answer by tips of the table!’”

In addition to his pedestrian excursions, Thoreau paid occasional visits to Cambridge and Boston, the attraction at the former place being the University Library, from which, owing to the insistence with which he petitioned the librarian and president, he was permitted unusual privileges in the taking out of books. At Boston he was fond of studying the books of the Natural History Society and walking on the Long Wharf; the rest “was barrels.” “When I go to Boston,” he wrote, “I go naturally straight through the city to the end of Long Wharf and look off, for I have no cousins in the back alleys. The water and the vessels are novel and interesting. I see a great many barrels and fig drums, and piles of wood for umbrella sticks, and blocks of granite and ice, etc., and that is Boston. The more barrels the more Boston. The museums and scientific societies and libraries are accidental. They gather around the barrels to save carting.” Salem, too, he sometimes visited as the guest of Hawthorne, who had left Concord in 1846, and he lectured once or twice at the Salem Lyceum, of which Hawthorne was the secretary. One other journey he had about this time of a more mournful character. In July 1850, when Margaret Fuller, who had become the wife of the Marquis of Ossoli, was shipwrecked on

her return from Italy and drowned off the coast of Fire Island, near New York, Thoreau with her other friends hurried to the scene of the disaster, to assist in the vain attempt to recover her body.

Though Thoreau had now attained a certain recognised position as a writer and lecturer, he was still compelled to earn the greater part of his means of subsistence by pencil-making or land-surveying. This last employment—or rather the company into which his employment brought him—was very far from being a congenial one; on such occasions he was no longer the poet-naturalist and idealist, but “merely Thoreau the surveyor,” as he informs his friend Blake. “When I sit in the parlors and kitchens of some with whom my business brings me—I was going to say in contact (business, like misery, makes strange bed-fellows), I feel a sort of awe, and as forlorn as if I were cast away on a desolate shore.” And elsewhere: “I rode with my employer a dozen miles to-day, keeping a profound silence almost all the way, as the most simple and natural course. I treated him simply as if he had bronchitis and could not speak, just as I would a sick man, a crazy man, or an idiot. The disease was only an unconquerable stiffness in a well-meaning and sensible man.”

Lecturing was probably a more agreeable occupation, though here, too, he speaks of himself as “simply their hired man”; while his uncompromising candour occasionally placed him in strained

relations towards his audience. "I take it for granted," he said, "when I am invited to lecture anywhere—for I have had a little experience in that business—that there is a desire to hear what I *think* on some subject, though I may be the greatest fool in the country, and not that I should say pleasant things merely, or such as the audience will assent to; and I resolve accordingly that I will give them a strong dose of myself. They have sent for me and engaged to pay me, and I am determined that they shall have me, though I bore them beyond all precedent." There were times, however, when Thoreau felt some diffidence about addressing his audience, as may be judged from the following letters to Colonel (then Mr.) Wentworth Higginson with reference to a lecture which was being arranged for him at Boston :

"CONCORD, 2d April 1852.

"I do not see that I can refuse to read another lecture, but what makes me hesitate is the fear that I have not another available which will *entertain* a large audience, though I have thoughts to offer which I think will be quite as worthy of their attention. However, I will try, for the prospect of earning a few dollars is alluring. As far as I can foresee, my subject would be Reality rather transcendently treated. It lies still in 'Walden, or Life in the Woods.' Since you are kind enough to undertake the arrangements, I will leave it to you to name an evening of next week, decide on the most suitable room, and advertise, if this is not taking you too literally at your word.

"If you still think it worth the while to attend to this, will you let me know, as soon as may be, what evening will be most convenient."

"CONCORD, 3d April 1852.

"I certainly do not feel prepared to offer myself as a lecturer to the Boston *public*, and hardly know whether more to dread a small audience or a large one. Nevertheless, I will repress this squeamishness, and propose no alteration in your arrangements. I shall be glad to accept of your invitation to tea."

Though Thoreau on several occasions made his mark as a lecturer, the general effect of the "strong dose" of himself was to puzzle and bewilder his hearers. "I have been told," says Mr. John Burroughs, "by a man who when a boy heard him read a lecture, that the audience did not know what to make of him. They came out, hardly knowing whether they had been sold or not. His coolness, his paradoxes, his strange and extreme gospel of nature, and evidently his indifference as to whether he pleased them or not, were not in the line of the usual popular lecturer."

In the autumn of 1852 Thoreau met Arthur Hugh Clough, who had come over to Boston with Thackeray and thence paid Emerson a visit at Concord. "Walk with Emerson to a wood with a prettyish pool," writes Clough in his diary for 14th November, the pool being presumably Walden. "Concord is very bare; it is a small sort of village, almost entirely of wood houses, painted white, with Venetian blinds, green outside, with two white wooden churches. There are some American elms and sycamores, *i.e.* planes; but the wood is mostly pine—white pine and yellow pine—somewhat scrubby, occupying the tops of the low banks and

marshy hay-land between. A little brook runs through to the Concord river. At 6.30, tea and Mr. Thoreau; and presently Mr. Ellery Channing, Miss Channing, and others." It was in this same year that Nathaniel Hawthorne returned to Concord, and took up his residence at "Hillside"—now renamed "Wayside"—an estate which had been for some years in Alcott's possession, and on which Thoreau and Alcott had done a great deal of manual work in constructing terraces and summer-houses.

It has already been stated that Thoreau's sympathies were enlisted from his earliest manhood in the cause of abolition, and that he was himself instrumental in furthering the escape of several fugitive slaves. One instance of this kind has been recorded by Mr. Conway, who was introduced to Thoreau by Emerson in the summer of 1853:¹

"When I went to the house next morning I found them all in a state of excitement by reason of the arrival of a fugitive negro from the South, who had come fainting to their door about daybreak, and thrown himself on their mercy. . . . I sat and watched the singularly lowly and tender devotion of the scholar to the slave. He must be fed, his swollen feet bathed, and he must think of nothing but rest. Again and again this coolest and calmest of men drew near to the trembling negro, and bade him feel at home, and have no fear that any power should again wrong him. He could not walk this day, but must mount guard over the fugitive, for slave-hunters were not extinct in those days, and so I went away after a while, much impressed by many little traits that I had seen as they appeared in this emergency, and not much disposed to cavil at their source, whether Bible or Bhaghavat."

¹ *Fraser*, April 1866.

At this time Thoreau's mind was a good deal occupied with the question of slavery, for in 1850 the iniquitous Fugitive Slave Law had been passed by Act of Congress, and in the spring of 1854 the heart of Massachusetts had been stirred by the case of Anthony Burns, an escaped slave, who was sent back by the authorities of the State in compliance with the demand of his owner. This event formed the main topic of Thoreau's essay on *Slavery in Massachusetts*, which was delivered as an address at the anti-slavery celebration at Framingham in 1854. "For my part," he said, "my oldest and worthiest pursuits have lost I cannot say how much of their attraction, and I feel that my investment in life here is worth many per cent less since Massachusetts last deliberately sent back an innocent man, Anthony Burns, to slavery." In his kindred essay on *Civil Disobedience*, when dealing with this same subject of state-supported slavery, he had expressed the conviction that if but *one* honest man in the State of Massachusetts were to withdraw his allegiance as a protest against this iniquity, and to be imprisoned therefor, "it would be the abolition of slavery in America." This was written before the appearance of John Brown.

In 1854 occurred the most memorable event of Thoreau's literary life—the publication of *Walden* by Messrs. Ticknor & Co. of Boston. The greater part of the book was drawn from the journal kept by Thoreau during his residence in the woods,

but there are also passages which were written at a later date, when he was working his materials into their ultimate form. The inducement to Thoreau to give the story of his sojourn at Walden to the world was, he tells us, that very particular inquiries had been made by his townsmen concerning the manner of his life, and that he felt he had something to say which bore not remotely on the social condition of the inhabitants of Concord. The result justified the expectations of the author in writing the book, and of the publishers in printing it, for in spite of the ridicule and hostility of some critics, a great deal of interest was aroused by *Walden*, and the edition appears to have been sold out in the course of a few years, in marked contrast to the unsaleableness of its predecessor, the *Week*.¹ From whatever point of view it be regarded, *Walden* is undoubtedly Thoreau's masterpiece; it contains the sum and essence of his ideal and ethical philosophy; it is written in his most powerful and incisive style, while by the freshness and *naïveté* of its narrative it excites the sympathy and imagination of the reader, and wins a popularity far exceeding that of his other writings. "*Walden*," says Channing, "increased his repute as a writer, if some great men thought

¹ In March 1855 the New York *Knickerbocker* devoted an article, entitled "Town and Rural Humbugs," to a comparison of Barnum and Thoreau, and declared *Walden* to be the antidote to Barnum's autobiography. *Walden* was reviewed in *Putnam's Magazine* in 1854, and was noticed in this country in *Chambers's Journal* for November 1857, under the title of "An American Diogenes."

him bean-dieted, with an owl for his minister, and who milked creation, not the cow. It is in vain for the angels to contend against stupidity."

"Welcome, Englishmen! welcome, Englishmen!" Thoreau exclaimed in *Walden*, "for I had had communication with that race." "A young Englishman, Mr. Cholmondeley, is just now waiting for me to take a walk with him," he writes in a letter dated 1st October 1854. This was Mr. Thomas Cholmondeley, of Overleigh, Cheshire, a nephew of Bishop Heber, and six years Thoreau's junior in age, the only Englishman, it appears, with whom Thoreau ever became intimate. He spent some time with Thoreau at Concord, accompanying him on a visit to Mr. Ricketson, a friend who lived at New Bedford; and the strong personal admiration which this travelled English gentleman conceived for the Concord hermit is one of many testimonies to Thoreau's singularly impressive character. A correspondence was maintained after Mr. Cholmondeley's return to Europe in 1855, and towards the end of that year Thoreau received a splendid gift of Oriental books from his English friend, who knew how deep an interest he felt in Buddhist literature. "I wish to inform you," Thoreau wrote to Mr. Ricketson, "that Cholmondeley has gone to the Crimea, 'a complete soldier,' with a design, when he returns, if he ever returns, to buy a cottage in the south of England, and tempt me over; but that, before going, he busied himself in buying, and has

caused to be forwarded to me by Chapman, a royal gift, in the shape of twenty-one distinct works, almost exclusively relating to ancient Hindoo literature, and scarcely one of them to be bought in America. I am familiar with many of them, and know how to prize them. I send you information of this as I might of the birth of a child." Mr. Cholmondeley again visited Concord in 1859.¹

The following extracts are from the letters to Mr. Blake :

"8th August 1854.—Methinks I have spent a rather unprofitable summer thus far. I have been too much with the world, as the poet might say. . . . I find it, as ever, very unprofitable to have much to do with men. It is sowing the wind, but not reaping the whirlwind ; only reaping an unprofitable calm and stagnation. Our conversation is a smooth and civil and never-ending speculation merely. I take up the thread of it again in the morning with very much such courage as the invalid takes his prescribed Seidlitz powders. Shall I help you to some of the mackerel? It would be more respectable if men, as has been said before, instead of being such pigmy desperates, were Giant Despairs. Emerson says that his life is so unprofitable and shabby for the most part, that he is driven to all sorts of resources, and among the rest to men. I tell him that we differ only in our resources. Mine is to get away from men . . . I have seen more men than usual lately ; and, well as I was acquainted with one, I am surprised to find what vulgar fellows they are. They do a little business commonly each day, in order to pay their board, and then they congregate in sitting-rooms and feebly fabulate and paddle in the social slush, and when I think that they have sufficiently relaxed, and am prepared to see them

¹ In later years he took the name of Owen. He succeeded to the Condoover estate, near Shrewsbury, in 1863, and died in the following year.

steal away to their shrines, they go unashamed to their beds, and take on a new layer of sloth. They may be single, or have families in their *faineancy*. I do not meet men who can have nothing to do with me because they have so much to do with themselves. However, I trust that a very few cherish purposes which they never declare. Only think for a moment of a man about his affairs! How we should respect him! How glorious he would appear! Not working for any corporation, its agent, or president, but fulfilling the end of his being! A man about *his business* would be the cynosure of all eyes.

"The other evening I was determined that I would silence this shallow din; that I would walk in various directions and see if there was not to be found any depth of silence around. As Bonaparte sent out his horsemen in the Red Sea on all sides to find shallow water, so I sent forth my mounted thoughts to find deep water. I left the village, and paddled up the river to the Fair Haven Pond. As the sun went down I saw a solitary boatman disporting on the smooth lake. The falling dews seemed to strain and purify the air, and I was soothed with an infinite stillness. I got the world, as it were, by the nape of the neck, and held it under in the tide of its own events, till it was drowned, and then I let it go down stream like a dead dog. Vast hollow chambers of silence stretched away on every side, and my being expanded in proportion and filled them. Then first could I appreciate sound, and find it musical."

"26th September 1855.—Mr. Ricketson, of New Bedford, has just made me a visit of a day and a half, and I have had a quite good time with him. He and Channing have got on particularly well together. He is a man of very simple tastes, notwithstanding his wealth; a lover of nature; but, above all, singularly frank and plain-spoken. . . . He says that he sympathises much with my books, but much in them is naught to him—'namby-pamby,' 'stuff,' 'mystical.' Why will not I, having common sense, write in plain English always; *teach* men how to live a simpler life, etc., not go off into ——? But I say that I have no scheme about it, no designs on men at all, and that if I had, my mode would be to tempt them with the fruit and not with the manure. To what

end do I lead a simple life, pray? That I may teach others to simplify their lives, and so all our lives be *simplified* merely, like an algebraic formula? Or not, rather, that I may make use of the ground I have cleared, to live more worthily and profitably?"

Increasing fame brought Thoreau an increasing number of friends, while his intimacy with Emerson, Alcott, and Channing continued as close as ever. Daniel Ricketson, who is mentioned in the above letter, was one of these later friends and correspondents. Their first meeting was at Christmas 1854, when Thoreau, then on his way to lecture at Nantucket, paid a passing visit to New Bedford, and spent a day or two in Mr. Ricketson's house. On presenting himself to his host, he was at first mistaken, as on several other occasions, for "a pedlar of small wares," but this unfavourable impression was quickly corrected when he gave proof of his singular conversational powers. The points in his personal appearance which particularly arrested Mr. Ricketson's attention were his keen blue eyes, "full of the greatest humanity and intelligence," and, next to these, his sloping shoulders (in which he resembled Emerson), long arms, and short sturdy legs, which generally enabled him to outwalk his companions in his daily excursions. The following letter was written by Thoreau to Mr. Ricketson in 1855. It will be observed that his health at this time was far from satisfactory.

"16th October 1855.—I have got both your letters at once. You must not think Concord so barren a place when Channing

is away. There are the river and the fields left yet; and I, though ordinarily a man of business, should have some afternoons and evenings to spend with you, I trust—that is, if you could stand so much of me. If you can spend your time profitably here, or without *ennui*, having an occasional ramble or *lête-à-lête* with one of the natives, it will give me pleasure to have you in the neighbourhood. You see I am preparing you for our awful unsocial ways—keeping in our dens a good part of the day—sucking our claws perhaps. But then we make a religion of it, and that you cannot but respect.

“If you know the taste of your own heart, and like it, come to Concord, and I’ll warrant you to season the dish with —, ay, even though Channing and Emerson and I were all away. We might paddle quietly up the river. Then there are one or two more ponds to be seen, etc.

“I should very much enjoy further rambling with you in your vicinity, but must postpone it for the present. To tell the truth, I am planning to get seriously to work after these long months of inefficiency and idleness. So for a long season I must enjoy only a low slanting gleam in my mind’s eye from the Middleborough Ponds far away. Methinks I am getting a little more strength into those knees of mine; and, for my part, I believe that God *does* delight in the strength of a man’s legs.”

In Mr. F. B. Sanborn, the well-known abolitionist, who as a young man came to live at Concord early in 1855, Thoreau found yet another friend, with whom he gradually became very intimate. The first impressions of Thoreau, as recorded at the time by one who was destined to be his biographer a quarter of a century later, are extremely interesting. “In his tones and gestures he seemed to me to imitate Emerson, so that it was annoying to listen to him, though he said many good things. He looks like Emerson, too, coarser, but with some-

thing of that serenity and sagacity which Emerson has. Thoreau looks eminently *sagacious*, like a sort of wise wild beast. He dresses plainly, wears a beard in his throat, and has a brown complexion." Thoreau's beard, which is here for the first time mentioned, must have been of quite recent growth, for in the crayon portrait of 1854 he appears as beardless.

Thoreau's friendship with Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, had been kept up since his visit to Staten Island, chiefly by letter, for Thoreau was seldom at New York; but Greeley had done him valuable service at a critical period in obtaining publication for several of his articles in *Graham*, *Putnam*, and other magazines, and in acting generally as a sort of literary patron and adviser. Greeley had a farm at Chappaqua, thirty-six miles north of New York, and in the early part of 1856 he pressed Thoreau to come to reside at this place and act as tutor to his children, which offer seems to have been for a time seriously entertained. In the following November Thoreau accompanied Alcott on a short visit to Greeley at Chappaqua, and a day or two later he had a memorable interview with a still more powerful and remarkable personality than his own. The meeting of Thoreau with Walt Whitman—of the author of *Walden* with the author of *Leaves of Grass*, must be told in Thoreau's own words, from his letters to Mr. Blake:

"19th November 1856.—Alcott has been here three times, and Sunday before last I went with him and Greeley, by invitation of the last, to G.'s farm, thirty-six miles north of New York. The next day Alcott and I heard Beecher preach; and what was more, we visited Whitman the next morning (Alcott had already seen him), and were much interested and provoked. He is apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen. Kings and aristocracy go by the board at once, as they have long deserved to. A remarkably strong though coarse nature, of a sweet disposition, and much prized by his friends. Though peculiar and rough in his exterior, he is essentially a gentleman. I am still somewhat in a quandary about him—feel that he is essentially strange to me, at any rate; but I am surprised by the sight of him. He is very broad, but, as I have said, not fine. He said that I misapprehended him. I am not quite sure that I do. . . ."

"7th December 1856.—That Walt Whitman, of whom I wrote to you, is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his second edition (which he gave me), and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. Perhaps I remember best the poem of Walt Whitman, an American, and the Sun-down poem. There are two or three pieces in the book which are disagreeable, to say the least, simply sensual. . . . As for its sensuality—and it may turn out to be less sensual than it appears—I do not so much wish that those parts were not written, as that men and women were so pure that they could read them without harm, that is, without understanding them.

"On the whole it sounds to me very brave and American, after whatever deductions. I do not believe that all the sermons, so called, that have been preached in this land, put together, are equal to it for preaching. We ought greatly to rejoice in him. He occasionally suggests something a little more than human. You can't confound him with the other inhabitants of Brooklyn. How they must shudder when they read him! He is awfully good.

"To be sure, I sometimes feel a little imposed on. By his heartiness and broad generalities he puts me into a liberal frame

of mind, prepared to see wonders—as it were, sets me upon a hill or in the midst of a plain—stirs me well up, and then—throws in a thousand of brick. Though rude and sometimes ineffectual, it is a great primitive poem, an alarum or trumpet-note ringing through the American camp. Wonderfully like the Orientals, too, considering that when I asked him if he had read them, he answered, ‘No; tell me about them.’

“I did not get far in conversation with him—two more being present—and among the few things I chanced to say, I remember that one was, in answer to him as representing America, that I did not think much of America, or of politics, and so on, which may have been somewhat of a damper to him.

“Since I have seen him I find that I am not disturbed by any brag or egoism in his book. He may turn out the least of a braggart of all, having a better right to be confident. He is a great fellow.”¹

In the following year Thoreau had the satisfaction of meeting another of the great figures of American democracy. John Brown, then fresh from his anti-slavery struggle in Kansas, was a guest at Mr. Sanborn’s house in March 1857, and was introduced by his host to Emerson, Alcott, Thoreau, and other Concord friends. It was arranged that Brown should address a meeting in the Town Hall on the subject of slave-holding. “On

¹ It is interesting, in this connection, to note the mention of Thoreau in Walt Whitman’s *Specimen Days in America*. On 17th September 1881, when visiting Mr. Sanborn at Concord, he met Emerson, Alcott, Louisa Alcott, and other Concord friends. “A good deal of talk,” he records, “the subject Henry Thoreau—some new glints of his life and fortunes, with letters to and from him—one of the best by Margaret Fuller, others by Horace Greeley, Channing, etc.—one from Thoreau himself, most quaint and interesting.” Mr. Sanborn informs me that on this occasion Whitman expressed a high estimate of Thoreau.

the day appointed," says Mr. Sanborn,¹ "Brown went up from Boston at noon, and dined with Mr. Thoreau, then a member of his father's family, and residing not far from the railroad station. The two idealists, both of them in revolt against the civil government because of its base subservience to slavery, found themselves friends from the beginning of their acquaintance. They sat after dinner discussing the events of the border warfare in Kansas, and Brown's share in them, when, as it often happened, Mr. Emerson called at Mr. Thoreau's door on some errand to his friend. Thus the three men met under the same roof, and found that they held the same opinion of what was uppermost in the mind of Brown." Emerson and Thoreau were both present at the meeting in the evening, when Brown produced a thrilling effect on his audience by his earnestness and eloquence, and by the display of the very chain worn by one of his sons who had been made prisoner and tortured by the champions of slavery. From that time there were many people in Concord who were favourable to Brown's cause.

In the spring of 1857 Thoreau, Alcott, and Ellery Channing paid a visit to Mr. Ricketson at "Brooklawn," New Bedford, as will be seen from the following entries in Alcott's diary :

"1st April 1857.—At Mr. Ricketson's, $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from New Bedford, a neat country residence, surrounded by wild pastures and low woods ; the little stream Achushnet flowing east of the

¹ *Memoirs of John Brown*, 1878.

house and into Fair Haven Bay at the City. Ricketson's tastes are pastoral, simple even to wildness, and he passes a good part of his day in the fields and woods, or in his rude shanty near his house, where he writes and reads his favourite authors, Cowper having the first place in his affections. He is in easy circumstances and has the manners of an English gentleman—frank, hospitable, and with positive persuasions of his own; a man to feel on good terms with, and reliable as to the things good and true—mercurial, perhaps, and wayward a little sometimes.

"3d April, A.M.—In house and shanty. Thoreau and Ricketson treating of nature and the wild. Thoreau has visited Ricketson before, and won him as a disciple, though not in the absolute way he has Blake of Worcester, whose love for his genius partakes of the exceeding tenderness of women, and is a pure Platonism to the fineness and delicacy of the devotee's sensibility. But Ricketson is himself, and plays the manly part in the matter, defending himself against the master's tough 'thoroughcraft' with spirit and ability.

"P.M.—Walk into the city and see Weiss.¹ Channing returns with me to Brooklawn, to smoke his pipe and joke with R. in the shanty.

On the occasion of one of these visits to Brooklawn Thoreau surprised the company by an unexpected outburst of hilarity. "One evening," says Mr. Ricketson, "when my wife was playing an air upon the piano, Thoreau became very hilarious, sang 'Tom Bowling,' and finally entered upon an improvised dance. Not being able to stand what appeared to me at the time the somewhat ludicrous appearance of our Walden hermit, I retreated to my 'shanty,' a short distance from my house; whilst my older

¹ The Rev. John Weiss, a fellow-collegian with Thoreau at Harvard. His admirable essay on Thoreau in the *Christian Examiner* has been more than once quoted.

and more humor-loving friend, Alcott, remained and saw it through, much to his amusement.”¹ Thoreau afterwards told his sister Sophia that in the excitement of this dance he had made a point of treading on the toes of his guileless friend.

Mr. Blake’s estimate of Thoreau’s character has already been quoted; equally interesting is that given by Mr. Ricketson. “On this point,” he says, “I can bear my own testimony, that without any formality he was remarkable in his uprightness and honesty; industrious and frugal; simple though not fastidious in his tastes, whether in food, dress, or address; an admirable conversationist, and a good story-teller, not wanting in humor. His full blue eye, aquiline nose, and peculiarly pursed lips added much to the effect of the descriptive powers. He was a man of rare courage, physically and intellectually. In the way of the former, he arrested two young fellows on the lonely road leading to his hermitage by Walden Pond, who were endeavouring to entrap a young woman on her way home, and took them to the village. Intellectually his was a strong manly mind, enriched by a classical education, and extensive knowledge of history, ancient and modern, and English literature—himself a good versifier, if not true poet, whose poetic character is often seen in his prose works.”

Side by side with this testimony may be placed

¹ Quoted in Mr. Sanborn’s *Thoreau*.

the following sketch, from the same pen, of Thoreau and his three Concord friends :¹

“ With thee I gladly roamed
To Baker farm, or to the beetling Cliff
That overhangs the gentle river's course,
Or to thy Walden, ‘ blue-eyed Walden ’ called
By that much-gifted man, thy chosen friend,²
Companion of thy walks and rural life.
With thee I've sat beside the glowing hearth
Of one so grand in thought, so pure of aim,³
New England's keenest, wisest scrutineer,
A poet, too, endowed with rarest gifts—
And listened to the converse thou and he,
So like and yet so unlike, often held.
And 'neath another roof all browned with age,
And overhung by one great sheltering elm,
Where dwells a seer decreed to solemn thought,⁴
Amid old books and treasures rare to see,
And learn'd of wisdom and devout of heart.
I see ye two, in memory's faithful glass,
As last I saw ye, brave and worthy pair !
The white-haired sage with deep and solemn words,
Sonorously expressed ; thy quick reply,
And eyes all glowing with supreme good sense—
A genial pair though of unequal age.”

Thoreau's indifference to fame, and to the greater wealth that is the result of fame, was very remarkable. He once told a friend, with every sign of satisfaction, how his first book, the *Week*, was still lying unsold and unsaleable at his publisher's offices. “ Within the last five years,” he wrote in his journal

¹ From *The Autumn Sheaf*, a volume of verse, privately printed by Mr. Ricketson some years after Thoreau's death.

² Ellery Channing.

³ Emerson.

⁴ Alcott.

in 1856, "I have had the command of a little more money than in the previous five years, for I have sold some books and some lectures, yet I have not been a whit better clothed or fed or warmed or sheltered, not a whit richer, except that I have been less concerned about my living; but perhaps my life has been the less serious for it, and I feel now that there is a possibility of failure. Who knows but I may come upon the town, if, as is likely, the public want no more of my books and lectures, as with regard to the last is already the case. Before, I was much likelier to take the town upon my shoulders."

This chapter may fitly conclude with some passages from a characteristic letter of Thoreau's about the "hard times" which were then causing distress and anxiety in New England:

"16th November 1857.—They make a great ado nowadays about hard times; but I think that the community generally, ministers and all, take a wrong view of the matter. This general failure, both private and public, is rather occasion for rejoicing, as reminding us whom we have at the helm—that justice is always done. If our merchants did not most of them fail, and the banks too, my faith in the old laws of the world would be staggered. The statement that ninety-six in a hundred doing such business surely break down, is perhaps the sweetest fact that statistics have revealed—exhilarating as the fragrance of mallows in spring. Does it not say somewhere, 'The Lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice'? If thousands are thrown out of employment, it suggests that they were not well employed. Why don't they take the hint? It is not enough to be industrious; so are the ants. What are you industrious about?

"The merchants and company have long laughed at trans-

cendentalism, higher laws, etc., crying 'None of your moonshine,' as if they were anchored to something not only definite, but sure and permanent. If there was any institution which was presumed to rest on a solid and secure basis, and more than any other represented this boasted common sense, prudence, and practical talent, it was the bank; and now these very banks are found to be mere reeds shaken by the wind. Scarcely one in the land has kept its promise. Not merely the Brook Farm and Fourierite communities, but now the community generally has failed. But there is the moonshine still, serene, beneficent, and unchanged. Hard times, I say, have this value, among others, that they show us what such promises are worth—where the *sure* banks are. . . .

"Men will tell you sometimes that 'money's hard.' That shows it was not made to eat, I say. Only think of a man, in this new world, in his log cabin, in the midst of a corn and potato patch, with a sheepfold on one side, talking about money being hard! So are flints hard; there is no alloy in them. What has that to do with his raising his food, cutting his wood (or breaking it), keeping indoors when it rains, and, if need be, spinning and weaving his clothes? Some of those who sank with the steamer the other day found out that money was *heavy* too. Think of a man's priding himself on this kind of wealth, as if it greatly enriched him. As if one struggling in mid-ocean with a bag of gold on his back should gasp out, 'I am worth a hundred thousand dollars.' I see them struggling just as ineffectually on dry land, nay even more hopelessly, for, in the former case, rather than sink, they will finally let the bag go; but in the latter they are pretty sure to hold and go down with it. I see them swimming about in their greatcoats, collecting their rents, really *getting their dues*, drinking bitter draughts which only increase their thirst, becoming more and more water-logged, till finally they sink plumb to the bottom. But enough of this."

CHAPTER VII

EXCURSIONS

To avoid the need of too frequently breaking the continuity of the narrative of Thoreau's Concord life, it is convenient to group together some of the chief excursions made by him between 1846 and 1860. And first as to his mode of journeying. The perfection of travelling, he thought, was to travel without baggage; and after considerable experience he decided that "the best bag for the foot-traveller is made with a handkerchief, or, if he study appearances, a piece of stiff brown paper well tied up." He would travel as a common man, and not as a gentleman, for he had no wish to spend a moment more than was necessary in the railway-carriage, among the sedentary travellers, "whose legs hang dangling the while," or to be a prey to the civility and rapacity of the landlords of hotels; he preferred to journey on foot, and to spend the night in the homes of farmers and fishermen, where he could sit by the kitchen fire, and hear the sort of conversation in which he was always interested.

"The cheapest way to travel," he wrote in the *Week*, "and the way to travel the farthest in the shortest distance, is to go afoot, carrying a dipper, a spoon, and a fish-line, some Indian meal, some salt, and some sugar. When you come to a brook or pond, you can catch fish and cook them; or you can boil a hasty-pudding; or you can buy a loaf of bread at a farmer's house for fourpence, moisten it in the next brook that crosses the road, and dip it into your sugar—this alone will last you a whole day." He wore a shabby gray coat and a drab hat, and carried with him a piece of tallow for greasing his boots, for he no more thought of blacking these than his face; and "many an officious shoe-black," he tells us, who carried off his shoes while he was slumbering, mistaking him for a gentleman, "had occasion to repent it before he produced a gloss on them." He was better pleased when the farmers called out to him, as he passed their fields, to come and help in the hay-making; or when he was mistaken for a travelling mechanic, and asked to do tinkering jobs, and repair clocks or umbrellas; or when, as once happened, a man wished to buy the tin cup which he carried strapped to his belt.

Before starting on an expedition it was his habit to procure all the available information from maps and guide-books, and he often took with him a part of the large Government map of Massachusetts. His pack was quickly made up, for he kept a list

of the few necessities that he carried, among which were sewing materials, a book for pressing plants, spy-glass, compass, and measuring-tape. He had learnt the art of camping out in his earlier excursions, and was well skilled in pitching a tent or constructing a hut at the shortest possible notice. On these occasions his favourite drink was tea, which he made strong and sweet in his tin cup, so that, as Channing hints, the traveller was not only refreshed but "grew intimate with tea-leaves." He was fond of carrying with him a large slice of cake, with plums in it, for he found that this furnished him with dinner and dessert at the same time. Thus simply equipped, he was practically independent of time-tables and hotel-lists, could roam wherever the fancy took him, and take his own time in his observation of the fauna and flora of the districts which he visited. Such expeditions were not only an agreeable recreation in themselves, but were a means of adding to his various collections and suggesting new subjects for his pen; so it was natural that the pleasant experience which he gained in his week's jaunt in 1839 should have been repeated more frequently in later years.

Cape Cod, the long sandy spit which was visited by Thoreau in 1849, and on several later occasions, is described by him as "the bared and bended arm of Massachusetts, behind which the State stands on her guard, with her back to the Green Mountains,

and her feet planted on the floor of the ocean, like an athlete protecting her Bay." All wild and desolate landscapes had an attraction for Thoreau, and he delighted in the dreary expanse of this long monotonous tract of shore, with its drift-wood and kelp-weed, flocks of gulls and plovers, and incessant din of waves. "If I were required," he says, "to name a sound the remembrance of which most perfectly revives the impression which the beach has made, it would be the dreary peep of the piping plover which haunts there. Their voices, too, are heard as a fugacious part in the dirge, which is ever played along the shore, of those mariners who have been lost in the deep since first it was created. But through all this dreariness we seemed to have a pure and unqualified strain of eternal melody, for always the same strain which is a dirge to one household is a morning song of rejoicing to another." His accounts of these vast sandy tracts are extremely vivid and picturesque; the very dash and roar of the waves seem to be reproduced, as though we were reading, as the author suggests, "with a large conch-shell at our ear." It was possibly with reference to his visit to Cape Cod that he wrote his stanzas about the sea-shore :

"My life is like a stroll upon the beach,
As near the ocean's edge as I can go;
My tardy steps its waves sometimes o'erreach,
Sometimes I stay to let them overflow.

“ My sole employment is, and scrupulous care,
To place my gains beyond the reach of tides,
Each smother pebble, and each shell more rare,
Which Ocean kindly to my hand confides.

“ I have but few companions on the shore :
They scorn the strand who sail upon the sea ;
Yet oft I think the ocean they’ve sailed o’er
Is deeper known upon the strand to me.

“ The middle sea contains no crimson dulse,
Its deeper waves cast up no pearls to view ;
Along the shore my hand is on its pulse,
And I converse with many a shipwrecked crew.”

It was amidst these surroundings that Thoreau, after witnessing the pathetic scenes that followed the wreck of an Irish brig at Cohasset, walked and meditated with a companion (Ellery Channing, presumably, though the name is not recorded) in the wet, windy days of a stormy October. “ Day by day,” it has been said,¹ “ with his stout pedestrian shoes, he plodded along that level beach—the eternal ocean on one side, and human existence reduced to its simplest elements on the other—and he pitilessly weighing each.” They journeyed northward, on the Atlantic side of the Cape, till they came to Provincetown at its upper extremity, avoiding towns and villages on their route, and spending the nights in the cottages of fishermen and lighthouse-keepers, where Thoreau was several times mistaken for a travelling pedlar.

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1865.

"Well," said an old fisherman, unconvinced by the explanations that had been offered, "it makes no odds what it is you carry, so long as you carry truth along with you." At Wellfleet, where the wayfarers were entertained in the hut of an aged oysterman, an idiot son of their host expressed his determination to get a gun and shoot the "damned book-pedlars, all the time talking about books." What might have been a more serious misunderstanding was caused by a robbery of the Provincetown Bank about the time of their visit to Cape Cod, for Thoreau learnt afterwards that the suspicion of the police had centred on him and his companion, and that their journey had been traced the whole length of the Cape.

The volume on *Cape Cod*, parts of which appeared in *Putnam's Magazine* in 1855, and in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1864, is deliberately formless in style, being interspersed with quotations from old histories and records of merely local interest; it abounds, however, in its author's dry sententious humour and epigrammatic paradoxes. It has been remarked that *Cape Cod* is in one sense the most human of Thoreau's books, and has more tenderness of tone than *Walden*, as if the sea had exercised a mellowing influence on his genius. Especially good are the Dutch pictures of the Wellfleet oysterman and the "sea-captains" of Provincetown. "It is worth the while," says Thoreau, "to talk with one whom his neighbors

address as Captain, though his craft may have long been sunk, and he may be holding by his teeth to the shattered mast of a pipe alone, and only gets half-seas-over in a figurative sense now. He is pretty sure to vindicate his right to the title at last—can tell one or two good stories at least.” In this volume the experiences of several visits are condensed into one account.

On 25th September 1850 Thoreau and Ellery Channing started on a week's tour in Canada, equipped each of them in the simple fashion which Thoreau adopted on his excursions (he avows that he wore his “bad weather clothes” on this occasion), and styling themselves, accordingly, the “Knights of the Umbrella and the Bundle.” They first visited Montreal, where the Church of Notre Dame made a great impression on Thoreau's imagination, as described by him in a very characteristic passage:

“It was a great cave in the midst of a city,—and what were the altars and the tinsel but the sparkling stalactites?—into which you entered in a moment, and where the still atmosphere and the sombre light disposed to serious and profitable thought. Such a cave at hand, which you can enter any day, is worth a thousand of our churches which are open only Sundays, hardly long enough for an airing, and then filled with a bustling congregation—a church where the priest is the least part, where you do your own preaching, where the universe preaches to you and can be heard. I am not sure but this Catholic religion would be an admirable one, if the priest were quite omitted. I think that I might go to church myself sometimes, some Monday, if I lived in a city where there was such a one to go to. In Concord, to be sure, we do not need such. Our

forests are such a church, far grander and more sacred. . . . I think of its value not only to religion, but to philosophy and to poetry ; besides a reading-room, to have a thinking-room in every city ! Perchance the time will come when every house even will have not only its sleeping-rooms, and dining-room, and talking-room or parlor, but its thinking-room also, and the architects will put it in their plans. Let it be furnished and ornamented with whatever conduces to serious and creative thought. I should not object to the holy water, or any other simple symbol, if it were consecrated by the imagination of the worshippers."

From Montreal they went on to Quebec, and thence to the Falls of St. Anne, thirty miles lower down the St. Lawrence. In the latter district they obtained lodging in a house where their French host and his family could speak but a few words of English, and they concluded that "a less crime would be committed on the whole if they spoke French with him, and in no respect aided or abetted his attempts to speak English," a resolve which they carried into effect with some amusing difficulties—for in spite of his Gallic extraction, a knowledge of the French tongue was not one of Thoreau's accomplishments—solving their frequent misunderstandings by writing on the table with a piece of chalk. What chiefly impressed Thoreau, during his brief visit to Canada, was the contrast between the imperialism of the Canadian cities, whose inhabitants appeared to him "to be suffering between two fires—the soldiery and the priesthood," and the more homely free-thinking independence of American life.

The *Yankee in Canada*, in which his experiences and impressions are related, was partly published in *Putnam* in 1852. "I do not wonder," he wrote to Mr. Blake, "that you do not like my Canada story. It concerns me but little, and probably is not worth the time it took to tell it. It has come to an end, at any rate; they will print no more, but return me my MS. when it is but little more than half done, as well as another I had sent, because the editor requires the liberty to omit the heresies without consulting me—a privilege California is not rich enough to bid for." The *Yankee in Canada* is certainly one of the least successful of its author's writings; for though it contains a few fine passages and interesting touches, it is decidedly overladen with description, the cities being, as Horace Greeley expressed it, "described to death." "I fear that I have not got much to say about Canada," says Thoreau, in his opening sentence, "not having seen much; what I got by going to Canada was a cold." This frigidity, if the truth be told, has left its mark on the pages of the *Yankee in Canada*.

The object of Thoreau's three excursions to the Maine Woods, the wild district which lies at the extreme north-east of New England, was chiefly to gratify his strong curiosity and interest in the habits and character of the Indians. In September 1846, during his fortnight's absence from the Walden hermitage, he visited Maine, and in company with a cousin, who was employed in the Bangor lumber

trade, made a voyage up the western branch of the Penobscot river, and ascended Ktaadn, one of the loftiest mountains of New England, over 5000 feet in height. The paper on "Ktaadn and the Maine Woods," which appeared in the *Union Magazine* in 1848, is a record of this expedition, and contains some vivid descriptions of the outlying lumber-farms and log-huts; the manufacture and management of the *batteau*, or "bark-canoe," by which they navigated the rapids of the Penobscot; their trout-fishing extraordinary in the clear swift streams which descend from the heights of Ktaadn; and, above all, the primitive solitudes of the Maine forests, which were still the haunt of the bear, the moose, the deer, the wolf, and other wild animals.

"What is most striking in the Maine wilderness is the continuousness of the forest, with fewer open intervals or glades than you had imagined. Except the few burnt-lands, the narrow intervals on the rivers, the bare tops of the high mountains, and the lakes and streams, the forest is uninterrupted. It is even more grim and wild than you had anticipated, a damp and intricate wilderness, in the spring everywhere wet and miry. . . . Who shall describe the inexpressible tenderness and immortal life of the grim forest, where nature, though it be mid-winter, is ever in her spring, where the moss-grown and decaying trees are not old, but seem to enjoy a perpetual youth; and blissful, innocent nature, like a serene infant, is too happy to make a noise, except by a few tinkling, lisping birds and trickling rills?"

In the autumn of 1853 Thoreau, accompanied by the same relative, and by an Indian hunter named Joe Aitteon, paid his second visit to the

Maine Woods, the lake of Chesuncook being this time his destination. The paper entitled "Chesuncook," which was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1858, is occupied in great measure with the subject of moose-hunting, and contains, among other things, some highly characteristic reflections on the "murder of the moose," in which Thoreau had been a witness and to some extent a participator :

"On more accounts than one, I had had enough of moose-hunting. I had not come to the woods for this purpose, nor had I foreseen it, though I had been willing to learn how the Indian manœuvred ; but one moose killed was as good, if not as bad, as a dozen. The afternoon's tragedy, and my share in it, as it affected the innocence, destroyed the pleasure of my adventure. It is true, I came as near as is possible to come to being a hunter and miss it, myself ; and as it is, I think I could spend a year in the woods, fishing and hunting just enough to sustain myself, with satisfaction. This would be next to living like a philosopher on the fruits of the earth which you had raised, which also attracts one. But this hunting of the moose merely for the satisfaction of killing him—not even for the sake of his hide—without making any extraordinary exertion or running any risk yourself, is too much like going out by night to some woodside pasture and shooting your neighbour's horses. These are God's own horses, poor, timid creatures, that will run fast enough as soon as they smell you, though they *are* nine feet high."

"The Allegash and East Branch," the account of Thoreau's third and final excursion to Maine, in July 1857, at which time he had been in weak health for two years, forms the concluding portion of the volume afterwards published under the title of *The Maine Woods*, and is chiefly concerned with

geographical topics, botanical specimens, and the character of Joe Polis, an intelligent Indian guide, from whom Thoreau derived much valuable information. "Having returned," wrote Thoreau to Mr. Blake, "I flatter myself that the world appears in some respects a little larger, and not, as usual, smaller and shallower, for having extended my range. I have made a short excursion into the new world which the Indian dwells in, or is. He begins where we leave off. The Indian who can find his way so wonderfully in the woods possesses so much intelligence which the white man does not, and it increases my own capacity, as well as faith, to observe it. I rejoice to find that intelligence flows in other channels than I knew. It redeems for me portions of what seemed brutish before." "As to Thoreau's courage and manliness," says Mr. Edward Hoar of Concord, who was his fellow-traveller on this expedition, "nobody who had seen him among the Penobscot rocks and rapids, the Indian trusting his life and his canoe to his skill, promptitude, and nerve, would ever doubt it."

The following letter, addressed by Thoreau to Colonel Wentworth Higginson, in reference to a projected tour through the Maine forests to Canada, is interesting as showing with what precision and practical acuteness his expeditions were planned :

"CONCORD, 28th January 1858.

"DEAR SIR—It would be perfectly practicable to go [to] the Madawaska the way you propose. As for the route to Quebec,

I do not find the 'Sugar Loaf Mts.' on my maps. The most direct and regular way, as you know, is substantially Montresor's and Arnold's and the younger John Smith's—by the Chaudière ; but this is less wild. If your object is rather to see the St. Lawrence River below Quebec, you will probably strike it at the Rivière du Loup (*v.* Hodge's account of his excursion thither *via* the Allegash. I believe it is in the second Report on the Geology of the Public Lands of Maine and Mass. in '37). I think that our Indian last summer, when we talked of going to the St. Lawrence, named another route, near the Madawaska—perhaps the St. Francis, which would save the long portage which Hodge made.

"I do not know whether you think of ascending the St. Lawrence in a canoe—but if you should, you might be delayed not only by the current, but by the waves, which frequently run too high for a canoe on such a mighty stream. It would be a grand excursion to go to Quebec by the Chaudière—descend the St. Lawrence to the Rivière du Loup—and return by the Madawaska and St. John's to Frederickton, or further—almost all the way *down stream*—a very important consideration.

"I went to Moosehead in company with a party of four who were going a-hunting down the Allegash and St. John's, and thence by some other stream over into the Ristigouche and down that to the Bay of Chaleur—to be gone six weeks.

"Our northern terminus was an island in Heron Lake on the Allegash (*v.* Cotton's R. R. and township map of Maine). The Indian proposed that we should return to Bangor by the St. John's and Great Schoodic Lake, which we had thought of ourselves ; and he showed us on the map where we should be each night. It was then noon, and the next day night, continuing down the Allegash, we should have been at the Madawaska settlements, having made only one or two portages ; and thereafter, on the St. John's there would be but one or two more falls with short carries, and if there was not too much wind, we could go down that stream 100 miles a day. It is settled all the way below Madawaska. He knew the route well. He even said that this was easier, and would take but little more time, though much further, than the route we decided on, *i.e.* by

Webster Stream, the East Branch, and Main Penobscot and Oldtown ; but he may have wanted a longer job. We preferred the latter, not only because it was shorter, but because, as he said, it was wilder.

"We went about 325 miles with the canoe (including sixty miles of stage between Bangor and Oldtown), were out twelve nights, and spent about forty dollars apiece, which was more than was necessary. We paid the Indian, who was a very good one, \$1.50 per day and 50 cents per week for his canoe. This is enough in ordinary seasons. I had formerly paid \$20 for an Indian and for white batteau-men.

"If you go to Madawaska in a leisurely manner, supposing no delay on account of rain or the violence of the wind, you may reach Mt. Kineo by noon, and have the afternoon to explore it. The next day you may get to the head of the lake before noon, make the portage of two and a half miles over a wooden R. R., and drop down the Penobscot half a dozen miles. The third morning you will perhaps walk half a mile about Pine Stream Falls, while the Indian runs down, cross the head of Chesuncook, reach the junction of the Cancomgamook and Umbazookskus by noon, and ascend the latter to Umbazookskus Lake that night. If it is low water, you may have to walk and carry a little on the Umbazookskus before entering the lake. The fourth morning you will make the carry of two miles to Mud Pond (Allegash water), and a very wet carry it is, and reach Chamberlain Lake by noon, and Heron Lake perhaps that night, after a couple of very short carries at the outlet of Chamberlain. At the end of two days more you will probably be at Madawaska.

"Of course the Indian *can* paddle twice as far in a day as he commonly does.

"Perhaps you would like a few more details. We *used* (three of us) exactly 26 lbs. of hard bread, 14 lbs. of pork, 3 lbs. of coffee, 12 lbs. of sugar (and could have used more), besides a little tea, Indian meal and rice, and plenty of berries and moose-meat. This was faring very luxuriously. I had not formerly carried coffee, sugar, or rice. But for solid food, I decide that *it is not worth the while to carry anything but hard bread and*

pork, whatever your tastes and habits may be. These wear best, and you have no time nor dishes in which to cook anything else. Of course you will take a little Indian meal to fry fish in, and half a dozen lemons also, if you have sugar, will be very refreshing, for the water is warm.

"To save time, the sugar, coffee, tea, salt, etc. etc., should be in separate watertight bags, labelled and tied with a leathern string; and all the provisions and blankets should be put into two large india-rubber bags, if you can find them watertight. Ours were not.

"A four-quart tin pail makes a good kettle for all purposes, and tin plates are portable and convenient. Don't forget an india-rubber knapsack, with a large flap, plenty of *dish cloths*, old newspapers, strings, and twenty-five feet of strong cord.

"Of india-rubber clothing the most you can wear, if any, is a very light coat, and that you cannot work in.

"I could be more particular, but perhaps have been too much so already.—Yours truly,

"HENRY D. THOREAU."

Mention has already been made of Thoreau's fondness for mountains. He possessed in a marked degree the instinct of topography, and with map and compass would make out his way unerringly through the wildest regions; and Channing tells us that he could run up the steepest places without losing breath. "He ascended such hills as Monadnock or Saddleback mountains," says the same authority, "by his own path, and would lay down his map on the summit and draw a line to the point he proposed to visit below, perhaps forty miles away in the landscape, and set off bravely to make the short cut. The lowland people wondered to see him scaling the heights as if he had lost his way, or at his jumping

over their cow-yard fences, asking if he had fallen from the clouds."

In July 1858 he made another expedition with his friend Edward Hoar, this time to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the Switzerland of New England, which he had visited with his brother nineteen years earlier. They travelled by carriage, and Thoreau complains in his journal of the loss of independence, as regards choice of camping-stations, which this method involved; it was not simple and adventurous enough to suit his tastes. He also disliked the "mountain houses" which were already erected in New Hampshire, with large saloons, and other appurtenances of the city, for the supposed convenience of the tourist; "give me," he says, "a spruce-house made in the rain." Their chief exploit during the fortnight they spent in New Hampshire was the ascent of Mount Washington, the highest mountain in New England, where, in descending towards Tuckerman's Ravine, Thoreau lost his footing on the steep crust of a snow-slope, and was only saved by digging his finger-nails into the snow. They camped for several days in a plantation of dwarf firs near the foot of the ravine, and by the carelessness of their guide in lighting a fire several acres of brushwood were set in a blaze, which proved to be the means of attracting the attention of two other friends. "In the course of the afternoon," says Thoreau in his journal, "we heard, as we thought, a faint shout, and it occurred to me that

Blake, for whom I had left a note at the Glen House, might possibly be looking for me, but soon Wentworth (the guide) decided that it must be a bear, for they make a noise like a woman in distress. After an hour or two had elapsed, we heard the voice again nearer, and saw two men. I went up the stream to meet Blake and Brown,¹ wet, ragged, and bloody from black flies. I had told Blake to look out for a smoke and a white tent. We had made a smoke, sure enough. We slept five in the tent that night, and found it quite warm." The next afternoon Thoreau sprained his ankle while scrambling on the rocks, and was laid up in the camp for two or three days.

"What mountain are you camping on nowadays?" he wrote to his friend Blake some months after the excursion. "We are always, methinks, in some kind of ravine, though our bodies may walk the smooth streets of Worcester. Our souls (I use this word for want of a better) are ever perched on its rocky sides, overlooking that lowland. What a more than Tuckerman's Ravine is the body itself, in which the soul is encamped, when you come to look into it! However, eagles alway have chosen such places for their eyries."

Monadnock, a mountain of nearly four thousand feet, which is visible from Concord on the northwest horizon, had been visited by Thoreau, like

¹ "Theo" Brown, a merchant living at Worcester.

Wachusett, in his early manhood. In 1858, a month before his excursion to the White Mountains, he camped a couple of nights on its summit in company with Mr. Blake, and two years later he again ascended it with Ellery Channing, who, being unaccustomed to mountain life, did not relish its inconveniences as much as his friend, but complains pathetically of the "fatigue, the blazing sun, the face getting broiled; the pint cup never scoured; shaving unutterable; your stockings dreary, having taken to peat," and other similar experiences. There is an interesting account of this adventure in one of Thoreau's letters to Blake:

"*4th November* 1860.—We made an excellent beginning of our mountain life. We went up in the rain—wet through—and found ourselves in a cloud there at mid-afternoon, in no situation to look about for the best place for a camp. So I proceeded at once, through the cloud, to that memorable stone 'chunk yard' in which we made our humble camp once, and there, after putting our packs under a rock, having a good hatchet, I proceeded to build a substantial house, which C. declared the handsomest he ever saw. (He never camped out before, and was no doubt prejudiced in its favour.) This was done about dark, and by that time we were nearly as wet as if we had stood in a hogshead of water. We then built a fire before the door, directly on the site of our little camp of two years ago, and it took a long time to burn through its remains to the ground beneath. Standing before this, and turning round slowly, like meat that is roasting, we were as dry, if not drier, than ever, after a few hours, and so at last we turned in.

"This was a great deal better than going up there in fair weather and having no adventure (not knowing how to appreciate either fair weather or foul) but dull commonplace sleep in a useless house, and before a comparatively useless fire, such as we get

every night. Of course we thanked our stars, when we saw them, which was about midnight, that they had seemingly withdrawn for a season. We had the mountain all to ourselves that afternoon and night. There was nobody going up that day to engrave his name on the summit, nor to gather blueberries. The genius of the mountain saw us starting from Concord, and it said, There come two of our folks. Let us get ready for them. Get up a serious storm, that will send a-packing these holiday guests. Let us receive them with true mountain hospitality—kill the fatted cloud. Let them know the value of a spruce roof and of a fire of dead spruce stumps. . . .

“After several nights’ experience, C. came to the conclusion that he was ‘lying out-doors,’ and inquired what was the largest beast that might nibble his legs there. I fear he did not improve all the night, as he might have done, to sleep. I had asked him to go and spend a week there. We spent five nights, being gone six days, for C. suggested that six working days made a week, and I saw that he was ready to *de-camp*. However, he found his account in it as well as I.”

This visit to Monadnock was the last of Thoreau’s excursions in which he camped out. The reasons which compelled the discontinuance of a practice in which he found such pleasure will appear when we resume the story of his life at Concord.

CHAPTER VIII

CLOSING YEARS

As early as 1855 Thoreau's health had begun to be a matter of some anxiety to himself and to his friends. Frequent mention has been made by those who knew him personally of the iron endurance and sturdy strength of limb which enabled him to outstrip the companions of his walks and open-air pursuits. Emerson, who was himself little qualified for an outdoor life, marvelled at his friend's indefatigable energy in tree-felling and field-work ; while Channing and others who accompanied him to the mountains suffered acutely from the exposure, which Thoreau seemed not to feel. Nevertheless, this power of prolonged endurance was due, there is reason to believe, far more to an indomitable spirit than to a natural strength of constitution ; for, idealist as he was, he was too apt to compel his body at all times to keep pace with his mind, and if he was somewhat exacting in his demands on his friends, he had still less consideration for his own weaknesses. "The physique given him at birth," says Dr. E. W.

Emerson, "was unusually slight. I have never seen a person with more sloping shoulders, and seldom a narrower chest. Yet he made his frame all that it could be made." It will be remembered that his college career was interrupted by an illness which kept him for some time from his studies; and as early as 1841 there is reference in the journal to a bronchial attack, which is significant when read in connection with the story of his closing years. "I am confined to the house," he wrote, "by bronchitis, and so seek to content myself with that quiet and serene life there is in a warm corner by the fireside, and see the sky through the chimney-top. Sickness should not be allowed to extend farther than the body. As soon as I find my chest is not of tempered steel and my heart of adamant, I bid good-bye to them, and look out for a new nature. I will be liable to no accidents." This last sentiment is eminently illustrative of Thoreau's philosophy of life.

In the autumn of 1855 we find him writing of the "months of feebleness" that had preceded, and of his satisfaction at partly regaining his health, though he would have liked "to know first what it was that ailed him." During the winter that followed he was able to walk afield as usual, and boasts that he had made it a part of his business "to wade in the snow and take the measure of the ice," and that, in spite of his recent ill-health, he was probably the greatest walker in Concord. In the spring of 1857 he refers

to his "two-year-old invalidity," from which we see that the disquieting symptoms had not wholly abated ; and it cannot be doubted that he at all times subjected himself to considerable risks both by the severity of his exertions in carrying heavy loads and taking long walks—"always doing ideal work" is Channing's expression—and also in the recklessness with which he exposed himself to all extremes of weather, and all changes of season, regardless alike of frost and sun, wind and snow, the chills of midnight and the mists of the early morning. For the present, however, we hear no more of his illness, and he continued to lead the same equable contented state of life which has already been described.

For several years after the appearance of *Walden* in 1854 Thoreau did not publish more of his writings, though he was busily engaged in various literary plans, chief among which was his projected book on the Indians. His relations with editors and publishers, partly no doubt owing to his own unaccommodating temperament, had not always been of the most amicable kind ; his essays were repeatedly refused by papers and magazines on account of their religious unorthodoxy, and it is said an editor once begged Emerson to persuade Thoreau to write an article containing no allusion to God. In 1859, when, at Emerson's suggestion, he contributed his paper on "Chesuncook" (the Maine Woods) to the *Atlantic Monthly*, of which Mr. Lowell was then editor, a fresh point of difference arose. A sentence in which

Thoreau had spoken in his idealistic style of the "living spirit" of the pine tree ("it is as immortal as I am, and perchance will go to as high a heaven, there to tower above me still") was struck out under editorial censorship, without the permission of the author, and this being an indignity to which Thoreau would never submit, he sent no more of his essays to the *Atlantic Monthly* until the editorship had passed into other hands. The sentence in question was, of course, restored when the article on "Chesuncook" was included in the volume on *The Maine Woods*.

On 3d February 1859 Thoreau records in his diary the death of his father, who had lived to the age of seventy-two. This was the third time he had mourned the loss of a near relative, his brother having died, as narrated, in 1842, and his sister Helen in 1849. "Five minutes before 3 P.M. father died. I have touched a body which was flexible and warm, yet tenantless—warmed by what fire? I perceive that we partially die ourselves, through sympathy, at the death of each of our friends or near relatives. Each such experience is an assault on our vital force. After long watching around the sick-bed of a friend we too partially give up the ghost with him, and are the less to be identified with this state of things." In the following letter to Mr. Daniel Ricketson he gives an interesting account of his father's character :

"CONCORD, 12th February 1859.

"FRIEND RICKETSON—I thank you for your kind letter. I sent you the notice of my father's death as much because you knew

him as because you know me. I can hardly realise that he is dead. He had been sick about two years, and at last declined rather rapidly though steadily. Till within a week or ten days before he died he was hoping to see another spring, but he then discovered that this was a vain expectation, and thinking that he was dying, he took his leave of us several times within a week before his departure. Once or twice he expressed a slight impatience at the delay. He was quite conscious to the last, and his death was so easy that though we had all been sitting around the bed for an hour or more expecting that event, as we had sat before, he was gone at last almost before we were aware of it.

"I am glad to read what you say about his social nature. I think I may say that he was wholly unpretending, and there was this peculiarity in his aim, that though he had pecuniary difficulties to contend with the greater part of his life, he always studied merely how to make a *good* article, pencil or other (for he practised various arts), and was never satisfied with what he had produced. Nor was he ever in the least disposed to put off a *poor* one for the sake of pecuniary gain, as if he laboured for a higher end.

"Though he was not very old, and was not a native of Concord, I think that he was, on the whole, more identified with Concord street than any man now alive, having come here when he was about twelve years old, and set up for himself as a merchant here at the age of twenty-one, fifty years ago.

"As I sat in a circle the other evening with my mother and sister, my mother's two sisters, and my father's two sisters, it occurred to me that my father, though 71, belonged to the youngest four of the eight who recently composed our family.

"How swiftly at last, but unnoticed, a generation passes away ! Three years ago I was called, with my father, to be a witness to the signing of our neighbour Mr. Frost's will. Mr. Samuel Hoar, who was there writing it, also signed it. I was lately required to go to Cambridge to testify to the genuineness of the will, being the only one of the four who could be there, and now I am the only one alive.

"My mother and sister thank you heartily for your sympathy. The latter in particular agrees with you in thinking that it is

communion with still living and healthy nature alone which can restore to sane and cheerful views. I thank you for your invitation to New Bedford, but I feel somewhat confined here for the present. I did not know but we should see you the day after Alger was here. It is not too late for a winter walk in Concord. It does me good to hear of spring birds and singing ones too, for spring seems far away from Concord yet. I'm going to Worcester to read a parlor lecture on the 22d, and shall see Blake and Brown. What if you were to meet me there? or go with me from here? You would see them to good advantage. Cholmondeley has been here again, after going as far south as Virginia, and left for Canada about three weeks ago. He is a good soul, and I am afraid that I did not sufficiently recognise him.

"Please remember me to Mrs. Ricketson, and to the rest of your family.—Yours,

HENRY D. THOREAU."

After his father's death Thoreau carried on the family business, pencil-making and the preparation of plumbago, on behalf of his mother and his younger sister Sophia. This same year, 1859, was destined to be one of the most memorable in his experience. We have seen how he was, from the first, an ardent abolitionist, how he had withdrawn his allegiance from the State of Massachusetts owing to its sanction of slavery, and had delivered lectures and published essays on the subject at a time when the outspoken profession of abolitionist principles was neither safe nor comfortable; and how he had himself concealed escaped slaves and assisted their flight to Canada. True-hearted American though he was, he had little respect for the patriotic feelings of those of his fellow-countrymen who could combine a pride in

their national liberties with an indifference to abolition ; and on one of the occasions when a runaway slave was surrendered to his owners by the Massachusetts Government, he is said to have proposed to his townsmen at Concord that the monument which commemorated American independence should be coated with black paint.

When he was introduced to John Brown in 1857 he doubtless recognised in him the "one righteous man" whose advent he had heralded in the essay on *Slavery in Massachusetts*, which he had written and published several years before, and it is not difficult to imagine the intensity of admiration with which he must have followed the phases of the great emancipator's career. Himself an individualist, and, as regards politics, less a man of action than a man of thought, he revered in Brown the very qualities in which he was himself deficient. "His was a more sour and saturnine hatred of injustice," says Channing ; "his life was more passive, and he lost the glory of action which fell to the lot of Brown. Thoreau worshipped a hero in a mortal disguise, under the shape of that homely son of justice ; his pulses thrilled and his hands involuntarily clenched together at the mention of Captain Brown." The final effort of Brown's heroism was now at hand, and the events that followed proved to be in some respects the crowning point of Thoreau's life also.

In October 1859 John Brown, who was just entering on his sixtieth year, was again in Concord,

and it was from Mr. Sanborn's house that he started on his last and fateful expedition against the Virginian slaveholders. The very evening before his departure he addressed another meeting in the Concord Town Hall, where Thoreau and Sanborn (their friendship being now the closer for their devotion to the same cause) were among his most earnest listeners. On 16th October Brown was arrested at Harper's Ferry, and then ensued those seven weeks of suspense and anxiety and vituperation which ended in his trial and death. To Thoreau—the shy solitary idealist—belongs the lasting honour of having spoken the first public utterance on behalf of John Brown, at a time when a torrent of ridicule and abuse was being poured by the American press on the so-called crazy enthusiast whose life was to pay forfeit for his boldness. Notice was given by Thoreau that he would speak in the Town Hall on Sunday evening, 30th October, on the subject of John Brown's condition and character; and when this course was deprecated by certain Republicans and Abolitionists as hasty and ill-advised, they received the emphatic assurance that he had not sent to them for advice, but to announce his intention of speaking. A large and attentive audience, composed of men of all parties, assembled to hear Thoreau's address,—the "Plea for Captain John Brown," which is in every respect one of the very finest of his writings. In the plainest and most unequivocal terms, and with all his accustomed

incisiveness of style and expression, he avowed his absolute approval of the conduct of a man who was indicted as a rebel and traitor. "It was his peculiar doctrine," he said, "that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others. Such will be more shocked by his life than by his death. I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his methods who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave." When we read the magnificent and heart-stirring passages in which he eulogised the heroic character of John Brown, we can well believe Emerson's statement that the address was heard "by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that surprised themselves":

"If this man's acts and words do not create a revival, it will be the severest possible satire on the acts and words that do. It is the best news that America has ever heard. It has already quickened the feeble pulse of the North, and infused more and more generous blood into her veins and heart, than any number of years of what is called commercial and political prosperity could. . . . Who is it whose safety requires that Captain Brown be hung? Is it indispensable to any northern man? Is there no resource but to cast this man also to the Minotaur? If you do not wish it, say so distinctly. While these things are being done, beauty stands veiled, and music is a screeching lie. Think of him—of his rare qualities!—such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand; no mock hero, nor the representative of any party. A man such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land. To whose making went the costliest material, the finest adamant; sent to be the redeemer of

those in captivity ; and the only use to which you can put him is to hang him at the end of a rope ! You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself to be the saviour of four millions of men."

On 1st November Thoreau read the same "Plea for John Brown" as the fifth lecture in the "Fraternity Course" in the Tremont Temple, Boston ;¹ from the following letter, addressed to Mr. Harrison Blake, it appears that he was desirous of reading it at Worcester also :

"CONCORD, 31st October.

"MR. BLAKE—I spoke to my townsmen last evening on "The character of Captain Brown, now in the clutches of the Slaveholder." I should like to speak to any company in Worcester who may wish to hear me, and will come if only my expenses are paid. I think that we should express ourselves at once, while Brown is alive. The sooner the better. Perhaps Higginson may like to have a meeting. Wednesday evening would be a good time. The people here are deeply interested in the matter. Let me have an answer as soon as may be.

HENRY D. THOREAU."

The following extract from Mr. Alcott's diary refers to the same subject :

"4th Nov. 1859.—Thoreau calls, and reports about the reading of his lecture on Brown at Boston and Worcester. Thoreau has good right to speak fully his mind concerning Brown, and has been the first to speak and celebrate the hero's courage and

¹ The *Liberator* of 4th Nov. 1859 contains an account of this lecture at Boston. "This exciting theme," it says, "seemed to have awakened 'the hermit of Concord' from his usual state of philosophic indifference, and he spoke with real enthusiasm for an hour and a half. A very large audience listened to this lecture, crowding the hall half an hour before the time of its commencement, and giving hearty applause to some of the most energetic expressions of the speaker."

magnanimity. It is these which he discerns and praises. The men have much in common—the sturdy manliness, straightforwardness, and independence. It is well they met, and that Thoreau saw what he sets forth as none else can. Both are sons of Anak and dwellers in Nature—Brown taking more to the human side and driving straight at institutions, while Thoreau contents himself with railing at, and letting them otherwise alone. He is the proper panegyrist of the virtues he owns himself so largely, and so comprehends in another.

“5th Nov.—Dine with Sanborn. Ricketson from New Bedford arrives. He and Thoreau take supper with us. Thoreau talks freely and enthusiastically about Brown, denouncing the Union, the President, the States, and Virginia particularly; wishes to publish his late speech, and has seen Boston publishers, but failed to find any to publish it for him.”¹

The time was indeed short; and from the first it could scarcely have been hoped that Brown's life would be spared. Those few weeks were probably the only period in Thoreau's career when he turned in vain to nature for the customary comfort and repose. “Though we wear no crape,” he said, “the thought of that man's position and probable fate is spoiling many a man's day here at the North for other thinking. If any one who has seen him here can pursue successfully any other train of thought, I do not know what he is made of. If there is any such who gets his usual allowance of sleep, I will warrant him to fatten easily under any circumstances which do not touch his body or purse. I put a piece of paper and a pencil under my pillow, and when I could not sleep I wrote in the dark.” He has also

¹ Quoted in Sanborn's *Life and Letters of John Brown*, 1885.

put on record the stunned, incredulous feelings with which he received, on 2d December, the news of the execution. On that a day solemn service in commemoration of Brown's martyrdom was held in the Town Hall at Concord, when addresses were delivered by Thoreau, Alcott, Emerson, and other abolitionists, and a funeral-hymn, composed by Sanborn, was sung by those assembled.¹ Seven months later, when Thoreau read at North Elba his address on "The Last Days of John Brown," his thoughts were still monopolised by the same subject. "I never hear," he said, "of any particularly brave and earnest man, but my first thought is of John Brown, and what relation he may be to him. I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than ever he was. He has earned immortality."

Thoreau regarded the whole episode of Brown's capture and trial as a touchstone designed to bring out into a strong light the nature of the American Government. That it afforded a touchstone of his own character few will deny. It has been well remarked² that "this instant and unequivocal indorsement of Brown by Thoreau, in the face of the most overwhelming public opinion even among anti-slavery men, throws a flood of light upon him. It is the most significant act of his life. It clinches him. It makes the colors fast." The "Plea for

¹ These speeches may be read in *Echoes from Harper's Ferry*, Boston, 1860.

² John Burroughs, in the *Century*.

Captain John Brown," which bears in every sentence unmistakable signs of the intensity of feeling under which it was written, must have convinced even those of Thoreau's hearers who were least in accord with him that they saw before them no cynical misanthrope who had placed himself in unreasonable antagonism to the social opinions of his townsmen, but a man of humaner sympathies and larger aspirations than their own.¹ And indeed the judgment of the good people of Concord had already changed concerning the eccentric recluse who, some twelve years before, had excited their contemptuous surprise by his sojourn in the Walden woods; they had learnt to appreciate the kindness and courtesy that underlay his rough exterior, and the shrewd wisdom which found expression in his trenchant and outspoken words. He thus came to be respected and honoured in the very quarter where honour is proverbially most difficult to attain for the prophet who is not willing to prophesy smooth things; and his fellow-citizens recognised the superiority of character "which addressed all men with a native authority."

Nor had the lapse of years and the increase of experience failed to exercise a mellowing effect on Thoreau's own temperament; and his intimate

¹ Yet Professor Nichol (*American Literature*) speaks of Thoreau as "lethargic, self-complacently defiant, and too nearly a stoico-epicurean adiaphorist (!) to discompose himself in party or even in national strifes." Full justice is done to this zeal in the anti-slavery cause by Dr. Japp (H. A. Page) in his book on Thoreau.

friends have noted how the foibles and crudeness which marked the less pleasing side in his distinctive and self-assertive personality were gradually losing their sharpness as he grew older, while he still retained all the freshness and originality of his genius, and looked forward to the future with the same unbounded confidence as ever. "No man," says Channing, "had a better unfinished life. His anticipations were vastly rich: more reading was to be done over Shakespeare and the Bible; more choice apple-trees to be set in uncounted springs,—for his chief principle was faith in all things, thoughts, and times, and he expected, as he said, 'to live for forty years.' . . . He had now attained the middle age, his health sound to all appearance, his plans growing more complete, more cherished; new lists of birds and flowers projected, new details to be gathered upon trees and plants. . . . Here was a great beginning in a condition of matchless incompleteness to be adjusted by no one but the owner." This prospect, unhappily, was not destined to be realised; but there is satisfaction in the thought that it was his championship of John Brown which formed the last public act of Thoreau's career, and that no act could possibly have been more characteristic and significant.

Meantime we have an interesting glimpse into Thoreau's private life at Concord in a letter to Mr. Ricketson which was written about this time:

"*4th November 1860.*—Why will you waste so many regards on me, and not know what to think of my silence? Infer from it what you might from the silence of a dense pine-wood. It is its natural condition, except when the winds blow, and the jays scream, and the chicaree winds up his clock. My silence is just as inhuman as that, and no more. You know that I never promised to correspond with you, and so, when I do, I do more than I promised.

"Such are my pursuits and habits that I rarely go abroad; and it is quite a habit with me to decline invitations to do so. Not that I could not enjoy such visits, if I were not otherwise occupied. I have enjoyed very much my visits to you, and my rides in your neighbourhood, and am sorry that I cannot enjoy such things oftener; but life is short, and there are other things also to be done. Not to have written a note for a year is with me a very venial offence. I think that I do not correspond with any one so often as once in six months. I am very busy after my fashion, little as there is to show for it, and feel as if I could not spend many days nor dollars in travelling; for the shortest visit must have a fair margin to it, and the days thus affect the weeks, you know. Nevertheless we cannot forego these luxuries altogether.

"Some are accustomed to write many letters, others very few. I am one of the last. At any rate, we are pretty sure, if we write at all, to send those thoughts which we cherish to that one who, we believe, will most religiously attend to them. I have a very pleasant recollection of your fireside, and I trust that I shall revisit it—also of your shanty and the surrounding regions."

It was in November 1860, immediately after the date of this letter, and four months after the delivery of his address at North Elba on "*The Last Days of John Brown*," that his fatal illness had its beginning. He took a severe cold while counting the rings on trees, at a time when the ground was covered with a deep snow; this led to a bronchial affection, which

was increased by his persistence in keeping a lecturing engagement at Waterbury, and the precautions which he afterwards exercised were too late, as consumption had then set in. It is to be noted that his grandfather, the emigrant from St. Helier, had died of consumption; so that it is possible that Thoreau inherited consumptive tendencies from that source. In the spring of 1861 he was advised by his doctor to travel ("to the sick," he had written in *Walden*, "the doctors wisely recommend a change of air and scenery"), and he was now willing to do in sickness what he had always refused to do in health, though even now he preferred to remain within the boundaries of the States. His plans are thus described in a letter to Mr. Blake, from which it will be seen that there was a marked and mournful difference between this invalid journey and the vigorous "excursions" of his happier days :

"CONCORD, 3d May 1861.

"I am still as much an invalid as when you and B. were here, if not more of one, and at this rate there is danger that the cold weather may come again before I have got over my bronchitis. The doctor accordingly tells me that I must 'clear out' to the West Indies, or somewhere—he does not seem to care much where. But I decide against the West Indies, on account of their muggy heat in the summer, and the South of Europe on account of the expense of time and money, and have at last concluded that it will be most expedient for me to try the air of Minnesota, say somewhere about St. Paul's. I am only waiting to be well enough to start. Hope to get off within a week or ten days.

"The inland air may help me at once, or it may not. At

any rate, I am so much of an invalid that I shall have to study my comfort in travelling to a remarkable degree—stopping to rest, etc., if need be. I think to get a through ticket to Chicago, with liberty to stop frequently on the way, making my first stop of consequence at Niagara Falls, several days or a week at a private boarding-house; then a night or day at Detroit; and as much at Chicago as my health may require. At Chicago I can decide at what point to strike the Mississippi, and take a boat to St. Paul's. I trust to find a private boarding-house in one or various agreeable places in that region and spend my time there. I expect, and shall be prepared to be gone three months; and I would like to return by a different route, perhaps Mackinaw and Montreal.

"I have thought of finding a companion, of course, yet not seriously, because I had no right to offer myself as companion to anybody, having such a peculiarly private and all-absorbing but miserable business as *my* health, and not altogether *his*, to attend to, causing me to stop here and go there, etc., unaccountably. Nevertheless I have just now decided to let you know of my intention, thinking it barely possible that you might like to make a part or the whole of this journey at the same time, and that perhaps your own health may be such as to be benefited by it. Pray let me know if such a statement offers any temptations to you."

Mr. Blake being unable to accompany Thoreau in this journey to Minnesota, his place was taken by Horace Mann, *junior*, a connection of Nathaniel Hawthorne's. In a letter addressed to Mr. Sanborn from Minnesota, on 26th June, Thoreau speaks of himself as better in health than when he left home, but still far from well, having performed the journey in a very dead-and-alive manner, though he much enjoyed the weeks they spent in the neighbourhood of St. Paul's and the novel sights of the Mississippi. "The grand feature hereabouts," he wrote, "is of

course the Mississippi River. Too much can hardly be said of its grandeur, and of the beauty of this portion of it. St. Paul's is a dozen miles below the Falls of St. Anthony, or near the head of uninterrupted navigation on the main stream, about two thousand miles from its mouth. There is not a 'rip' below that; and the river is almost as wide in the upper as the lower part of its course. Steamers go up to the Sauk Rapids, above the falls, and then you are fairly in the pine-woods and lumbering country. Thus it flows from the pine to the palm." From St. Paul's Thoreau and his companion made a further expedition some three hundred miles up the Minnesota or St. Peter's River, in order to witness a gathering of the Sioux Indians at Redwood, where an annual payment was made to the tribe by the United States Government. "A regular council was held with the Indians, who had come in on their ponies, and speeches were made on both sides through an interpreter, quite in the described mode—the Indians, as usual, having the advantage in point of truth and earnestness, and therefore of eloquence. They were quite dissatisfied with the white man's treatment of them, and probably have reason to be so. In the afternoon the half-naked Indians performed a dance, at the request of the governor, for our amusement and their own benefit; and then we took leave of them, and of the officials who had come to treat with them."

One of the sights which most interested Thoreau, during this tour in the West, was that of the aboriginal crab-apple. "I never saw the crab-apple," he writes in the essay on "Wild Apples," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862, "till May 1861, thus it was a half-fabulous tree to me. At last I had occasion to go to Minnesota, and on entering Michigan, I began to notice from the cars a tree with handsome rose-coloured flowers. At first I thought it some variety of thorn, but it was not long before the truth flashed on me that this was my long-sought crab-apple. But the cars never stopped before one, and so I was launched on the bosom of the Mississippi without having touched one, experiencing the fate of Tantalus. On arriving at St. Anthony's Falls, I was sorry to be told that I was too far north for the crab-apple. Nevertheless I succeeded in finding it about eight miles west of the falls; touched it and smelled it, and secured a lingering corymb of flowers for my herbarium."

Meantime the spark which had been kindled by John Brown's heroism had not been quenched by his death, and the war between the northern and southern States had already commenced in the spring of 1861. We are told that the misfortunes of the North in the early years of the war affected Thoreau so powerfully that he used to say he could never recover while the war lasted, and he told his friends in these dark days that he was "sick for his country." There is a reference to this subject in his letter from

Minnesota to Mr. Sanborn. "I am not even so well informed as to the progress of the war as you suppose. The people of Minnesota have *seemed* to me more cold, to feel less implicated in this war than the people of Massachusetts. However, I have dealt partly with those of southern birth, and have seen but little way beneath the surface. I was glad to be told yesterday that there was a good deal of weeping here at Redwing the other day, when the volunteers stationed at Fort Snelling followed the regulars to the seat of war. They do not weep when their children go *up* the river to occupy the deserted forts, though they *may* have to fight the Indians there. I do not even know what the attitude of England is at present." "Had Thoreau retained health and life," says Colonel Wentworth Higginson, "there is no telling but what our civil war might have brought out a wholly new aspect of him, as it did for so many."

The journey to Minnesota was not productive of any lasting improvement in Thoreau's health. When he visited Mr. Ricketson at New Bedford a few weeks later (on which occasion an ambrotype portrait was taken at Mr. Ricketson's request), his racking cough impressed his friend with the conviction that his strength was fast failing, though his face, "except for a shade of sadness in the eyes," did not betray the change. But in the course of the winter that followed it became evident that the disease had reached a point at which it could not be

arrested, and that there was no longer any hope of saving his life. Then it was that the exaltation of spirit over matter, of the mind over the body, which had throughout his life been one of Thoreau's prominent characteristics, was still more strongly manifested as he neared his death; whatever his friends might feel, he himself appeared to be unaffected by his illness; he looked at himself, as it were, from an outer standpoint, surveying, without alarm and without anxiety, this intrusion into his bodily system of a weakness to which his mind at least should never be subject. The story of his last illness has been written by more than one eyewitness, by none so powerfully and pathetically as by his friend Channing :

“With an unfaltering trust in God's mercies, and never deserted by his good genius, he most bravely and unsparingly passed down the inclined plane of a terrible malady, pulmonary consumption, working steadily at the completing of his papers to his last hours, or so long as he could hold the pencil in his trembling fingers. His state of mind during this, his only decided illness, deserves notice as in part an idiosyncrasy. He accepted it heroically, but in no wise after the traditional manner. He experienced that form of living death when the very body refuses sleep, such is its deplorable dependence on the lungs now slowly consumed by atoms; in its utmost terrors refusing aid from any opiate in causing slumber, and declaring uniformly that he preferred to endure with a clear mind the worst penalties of suffering rather than be plunged in a turbid dream by narcotics. He ineffably retired into his inner mind, into that unknown, unconscious, profound world of existence where he excelled; there he held inscrutable converse with just men made perfect, or what else, absorbed in himself. An

ineffable reserve shrouded this to him unforeseen fatality ; he never had reason to believe in what he could not appreciate, nor accepted formulas of mere opinions ; the special vitalisation of all his beliefs, self-consciously, lying in the marrow of his theology."

It was one of Thoreau's maxims that work of some kind is as necessary for those who are sick as for those who are strong, and it is recorded by his sister Sophia, who, with their mother's help, tenderly nursed him in his illness, that to the last day of his life he never ceased to call for the manuscripts on which he was engaged. He had again become a contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, which was now edited by Mr. Fields in the place of Mr. Lowell, and during the last few months of his life he accomplished, in his sister's words, "a vast amount of labour," in preparing these papers for the press, and in completing the records of his visits to the Maine Woods. There was something fitting in the fact that in this closing scene of his life his thoughts should be occupied with the Indian, whom he resembled not only in his sympathy with wild nature, but also in his stoical reserve, unfaltering self-command, and passive acquiescence in whatever his destiny had in store for him.

His unfailing patience and fortitude are described as wonderful by those who witnessed them ; it was impossible to be sad in his presence, or to realise that one so cheerful and contented was on the verge of death. When he could not sleep he would ask

his sister to arrange the furniture so as to cast weird shadows on the walls, and he expressed the wish that his bed were in spiral form, that he might curl up in it as in a shell ; at other times, when rest was not altogether denied him, he would interest his friends by a narration of his strange and fantastic dreams, saying that "sleep seemed to hang round his bed in festoons." As long as sufficient strength remained to him, he resolutely took his seat at table with his mother and sister, insisting that "it would not be social to take his meals alone," and when he could no longer walk, his bed was brought down into the front parlour of the house, where he was visited by many of his neighbours and townsmen, from whom, during the whole course of his illness, he received such touching and gratifying tokens of kindness and affection that he would sometimes protest he would be ashamed to stay in the world after so much had been done for him. We may be sure that Emerson was a frequent visitor, and that Blake, Channing, Alcott, and other friends did not forget him at this time. Several of the remarks which he made on these occasions were very memorable and characteristic. When Channing, the faithful and intimate companion of his walks and studies, hinted at the weary change that had now come over his life, and how "solitude began to peer out curiously from the dells and wood-roads," he whispered in reply, "It is better some things should end." He said to Alcott that he "should leave the world without a regret." Nor in these last weary

months of suffering did he lose his shrewd humour and native incisiveness of speech. "Well, Mr. Thoreau, we must all go," said a well-meaning visitor, who thought to comfort the dying man by the ordinary platitudes. "When I was a boy," answered Thoreau, "I learnt that I must die, so I am not disappointed now; death is as near to you as it is to me." When asked whether he "had made his peace with God," he quietly replied that "he had never quarrelled with him." He was invited by another acquaintance to enter into a religious conversation concerning the next world. "One world at a time," was the prompt retort.

It would, however, be an injustice to Thoreau to represent his death-bed as nothing but a scene of stoical fortitude and iron self-restraint—there are other and not less admirable traits of tenderness and love. From his window, which looked out on the village street, he saw passing and repassing some of his favourite children, whom he had so often conducted in their merry expeditions after the huckleberry or water-lily. "Why don't they come to see me?" he said to his sister. "I love them as if they were my own"; and it is pleasant to read that after receiving an invitation they often visited him, and enjoyed these last meetings scarcely less than the first. The sound of music had the same charm for him to the end, and on hearing a street musician play some old tune that had been familiar to him in childhood, he is said to have

shed tears and asked his mother to give the man some money.

The thought of death was never a cause of anxiety to him ; but terrible, indeed, to a man of Thoreau's temperament must have been the death-in-life of that long and dreary winter, when the daily walk and converse with nature, which had seemed necessities of his existence, were now but memories of the past, and even the daily record in the journal must needs be discontinued, since there was in fact nothing to record. Yet of this outer life, in which for twenty-five years he had so faithfully and unremittingly busied himself, he now spoke no word, and we are told that no stranger could have imagined from his demeanour that "he ever had a friend in field or wood." Once only, as he stood at his window, did he allude to what must have been so constantly in his thoughts. "I cannot see on the outside at all," he said to his friend Channing; adding, "We thought ourselves great philosophers in those wet days, when we used to go out and sit down by the wall-sides." There is on this point a singular and pathetic similarity between Thoreau's last illness and that of Richard Jefferies, who of all men was nearest to Thoreau in passionate devotion to open-air life. "My prison bars," wrote Jefferies in one of his latest essays,¹ "are but a sixteenth of an inch thick; I could

¹ *Hours of Spring*, 1886

snap them with a fillip—only the window-pane, to me as impenetrable as the twenty-foot wall of the Tower of London. . . . To-day through the window-pane I see a lark high up against the gray cloud, and hear his song. I cannot walk about and arrange with the buds and gorse-bloom; how does he know it is the time for him to sing? Without my book and pencil and observing eye, how does he understand that the hour has come? Without me to tell him, how does this lark to-day, that I hear through the window, know it is his hour?" Such thoughts must often have arisen in Thoreau's, as in Jefferies', mind; though his sterner and more reticent nature would not yield them the expression in which Jefferies found relief.

In the last of his published letters, written for him by his sister's hand some six weeks before his death, we see the indomitable spirit which upheld him through all:

"21st March 1862.—I thank you for your very kind letter, which, ever since I received it, I have intended to answer before I died, however briefly. I am encouraged to know that, so far as you are concerned, I have not written my books in vain. I was particularly gratified, some years ago, when one of my friends and neighbors said, 'I wish you would write another book—write it for me.' He is actually more familiar with what I have written than I am myself.

"I am pleased when you say that in the *Week* you like especially 'those little snatches of poetry interspersed through the book,' for these, I suppose, are the least attractive to most readers. I have not been engaged in any particular work on

botany, or the like, though, if I were to live, should have much to report on natural history generally.

"You ask particularly after my health. I *suppose* that I have not many months to live; but, of course, I know nothing about it. I may add that I am enjoying existence as much as ever, and regret nothing."

It was on 6th May 1862, a beautiful spring morning, that the end came. At eight o'clock, shortly after enjoying the odour of a bunch of hyacinths from a friend's garden, he asked to be raised upright in his bed; his breathing became gradually fainter and fainter, until he died without pain or struggle in the presence of his mother and sister, his last audible words being "moose" and "Indian"—the thought still intent on the scenes that had detained it so long.

He was buried, beside his brother John, in "Sleepy Hollow," the quiet Concord burial-ground, close to the spot which became the grave of Nathaniel Hawthorne two years later. An address was given at the funeral by Emerson,¹ who paid a just and noble tribute to the genius of his friend, and one of Thoreau's poems, "Sic Vita," was read by Alcott. "While we walked in procession up to the church," says one who was present,² "though the bell tolled the forty-four years he had numbered, we could not deem that *he* was dead whose ideas and sentiments were so vivid in our souls. As the

¹ Afterwards published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1862, and prefixed to *Excursions*, 1863.

² W. R. Alger: *Solitudes of Nature and of Man*.

fading image of pathetic clay lay before us, strewn with wild-flowers and forest sprigs, thoughts of its former occupant seemed blent with all the local landscapes. We still recall with emotion the tributary words so fitly spoken by friendly and illustrious lips. The hands of friends reverently lowered the body of the lonely poet into the bosom of the earth, on the pleasant hill-side of his native village, whose prospects will long wait to unfurl themselves to another observer so competent to discriminate their features, and so attuned to their moods." His grave is marked by a red stone, which bears no inscription but his name and date of death.

Thoreau's collections of plants, Indian relics, and the like, were bequeathed by him to the Society of Natural History at Boston, of which he was an honorary member. The family business of pencil-making was carried on for some years after his death by his sister Sophia, who herself lived till 1876. The last remaining member of the family was Miss Maria Thoreau, the sister of Thoreau's father, who outlived her brother and her brother's children, and died in Maine at an advanced age in 1881. But though the family is thus extinct in New England, the name of Thoreau is indelibly associated with the scenes amidst which he lived and died; and it has been well remarked that "the village of Concord is his monument, covered with suitable inscriptions by himself." A cairn of

stones marks the site of the hut on the shore of Walden Pond, where the poet-naturalist spent the two most memorable years of his life, and wrote the greater part of his most memorable volume.¹

The sense of irreparable personal loss, which Thoreau's death impressed on the minds of those who knew him intimately, is very noticeable in their records of him,—alike in Emerson's Memoir, and Channing's "Memorial Verses," and Sanborn's Monograph, and the writings of Blake, Ricketson, and Alcott.² Perhaps there is no better expression of this feeling than in Louisa Alcott's beautiful stanzas on "Thoreau's Flute":

"We sighing said, 'Our Pan is dead ;
His pipe hangs mute beside the river,
Around it wistful sunbeams quiver,
But Music's airy voice is fled.
Spring mourns as for untimely frost :
The bluebird chants a requiem ;
The willow-blossom waits for him ;—
The Genius of the wood is lost.'

¹ The following is an extract from the journal of the greatest of the many pilgrims who have since visited these scenes. 'A half-hour at Hawthorne's and Thoreau's graves. I got out and went up, of course, on foot, and stood a long while and pondered. They lie close together in a pleasant wooded spot well up the cemetery hill, 'Sleepy Hollow.' . . . Then to Walden Pond, that beautifully embower'd sheet of water, and spent over an hour there. On the spot in the woods where Thoreau had his solitary house is now quite a cairn of stones, to mark the place ; I too carried one and deposited on the heap.'—Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days in America*, September 1881.

² It is said that Emerson conversed more often and more tenderly of Thoreau than of any other of his friends.

“Then from the flute, untouched by hands,
There came a low harmonious breath ;
‘For such as he there is no death ;
His life the eternal life commands ;
Above man’s aims his nature rose.
The wisdom of a just content
Made one small spot a continent,
And turned to poetry life’s prose.

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“‘To him no vain regrets belong
Whose soul, that finer instrument,
Gave to the world no poor lament,
But wood-notes ever sweet and strong.
O lonely friend ! he still will be
A potent presence, though unseen—
Steadfast, sagacious, and serene ;
Seek not for him—he is with thee.’”

“My greatest skill,” says Thoreau himself, in words that might well stand as his epitaph, “has been to want but little. For joy I could embrace the earth. I shall delight to be buried in it. And then I think of those amongst men who will know that I love them, though I tell them not.”

CHAPTER IX

DOCTRINES

A DELIBERATE intent of advocating any particular class of doctrines is more than once disclaimed by Thoreau. He was an independent thinker, who put his theories into practice with unusual courage, and expressed himself in his books with unusual frankness,—but he had no preconceived designs on the opinions of his fellow-men; he lived his life and said his say, and if he sought to exercise any influence on others, it was by no direct persuasion of argument or proselytism, but indirectly by the example of his own personality. He once asked a friend, who had entered the church, whether he had ever yet in preaching been “so fortunate as to say anything.” On being answered in the affirmative, he remarked, “Then your preaching days are over. Can you bear to say it again?” By nature and temperament he was averse to any elaborate “system” of philosophy or ethics; he questioned everything, and would accept no philosophical formula for himself, nor offer any to his readers. “The wisest man,” he

says, "preaches no doctrines; he has no scheme; he sees no raftèr, not even a cobweb, against the heavens—it is clear sky." This constitutional unwillingness to be trammelled by the acceptance of any intellectual tenet will be found to have left its mark very distinctly both on the substance and the form of Thoreau's writings, and should be borne in mind when he is spoken of as the preacher of an ethical gospel; nevertheless, since he did in truth dwell with much insistence on certain important truths, intellectual and moral, which are too generally overlooked, we are justified, with this reservation, in formulating as "doctrines" the views which he most frequently expressed.

We have already seen that he was before everything an idealist—his transcendentalism was not an adopted creed, but an innate habit of mind from which he never swerved, and which dominated all his philosophy. "As it respects these things," he says in his *Letters*, "I have not changed an opinion one iota from the first. Above a certain height there is no change. I am a Switzer on the edge of the glacier, with his advantages and disadvantages—goitre, or what not (you may suspect it to be some kind of swelling, at any rate). I have had but one spiritual birth, and now, whether it rains or snows, whether I laugh or cry, fall farther below or approach nearer to my standard—not a new scintillation of light flashes on me, but ever and anon, though with longer intervals, the same surprising and everlast-

ingly new light dawns to me." So far, it may be said, he did not differ to any remarkable degree from other idealists, who have all more or less recognised and followed this guiding light of the inner consciousness. But here we come to that distinctive quality which sets Thoreau on a separate footing from Emerson and other transcendentalist writers—the resolute practicalness which shows itself as clearly in his doctrines as in his actions. Though the ideal was always before him, he had no taste for the subtleties of mere metaphysical abstractions, but made a strong actuality the basis of his reasoning: there were thus two sides to his character and philosophy, the one the mystical and transcendental, which faced the boundless possibilities of the future, the other the practical and terrestrial, which was concerned with the realities of the present and the past. "In view of the future or possible," he wrote in *Walden*, "we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side"; and again, in the journal, "We believe that the possibility of the future far exceeds the accomplishments of the past; we review the past with common sense, but we anticipate the future with transcendental senses."

It is true that these two qualities did not always work quite harmoniously together; for Thoreau was not careful to be systematic and verbally consistent; as he himself says, "How can I communicate with the gods, who am a pencil-maker on earth, and not be

insane?" But, as a rule, the successful combination of common sense with transcendental sense is the characteristic feature of his doctrines; and this very dreamer and mystic who boasted that he built his castles in the air and then put the foundations under them, could also assert with equal truth, in another connection, that "it afforded him no satisfaction to commence to spring an arch before he had got a solid foundation." His philosophy of life is eminently keen-sighted, sound, and practical. "I love," he says, "to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me; not hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less; not suppose a case, but take the case that is; to travel the only path I can, and that on which no power can resist me. . . . I would not be one of those who will foolishly drive a nail into mere lath and plastering. Give me a hammer, and let me feel for the furrowing. Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the work."

It is this more patient and practical hold on the common everyday realities of life, this firm concentration on certain solid facts, to the detriment it may be of a wide philosophical range of thought, that differentiates Thoreau from Emerson and other thinkers of the Emersonian school. It has been asserted that Thoreau "is Emerson without domestic ties, or wish for them; save for a streak of benevolence, without those of humanity."¹ But this subordination

¹ Prof. Nichol's *American Literature*.

of Thoreau as a mere pupil and follower of Emerson is not warranted by the facts of their relationship. It is true that Emerson himself expressed the opinion that Thoreau had not, in the strict sense, put any "new ideas" into circulation—"I am familiar with all his thoughts," he said; "they are mine, quite originally dressed." But, even if we waive the question whether Emerson had really gauged Thoreau's mind as fully as he imagined (and here what Hawthorne said of Emerson might be appropriately cited, that "the heart of many an ordinary man had perchance inscriptions which he could not read"), it is evident that a pupil who dresses a master's thoughts originally is a master himself, since originality in supplying methods is scarcely less remarkable than in supplying impulses. This originality of Thoreau is frankly recognised by Emerson in a recently published passage of his diary.¹ "In reading Henry Thoreau's journal," he wrote, a year after his friend's death, "I am very sensible of the vigor of his constitution. That oaken strength which I noted whenever he walked or worked or surveyed wood-lots, the same unhesitating hand with which a field-laborer accosts a piece of work which I should shun as a waste of strength, he shows in his literary task. He has muscle, and ventures on and performs feats which I am forced to decline. In reading him I find the same thoughts, the same spirit that is in me, but he takes a step

¹ *Emerson in Concord*, 1889.

beyond and illustrates by excellent images that which I should have conveyed in a sleepy generalisation. 'Tis as if I went into a gymnasium, and saw youths leap and climb and swing with a force unapproachable, though their feats are only a continuation of my initial grapplings and jumps." If, therefore, we accept the compendious statement made by one of Hawthorne's biographers,¹ that Thoreau was "Emerson's independent moral man made flesh," we must remember that this fact may be quite compatible with Thoreau's possession of original genius.

This practical tendency in Thoreau's genius was fostered and strengthened by his firm belief in the freedom of the human will. "I know of no more encouraging fact," he says, "than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor." His religious and moral creed was founded on a fixed optimistic conviction that nature is working to some wise and benevolent end; joy was for him "the condition of life," and despondency nothing more than a senseless and idle aberration. "There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons, I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me." So deep-rooted and determined was this optimism that existence

¹ Mr. Henry James.

itself, with all the facts of existence, was welcomed and venerated as an undeniable blessing; "If I could," he said, in one of his accustomed paradoxes, "I would worship the parings of my nails." He was intent on seeing harmony in nature, even where appearances were against it; as when he declares that the voice of the cat-owl, by which he was serenaded in Walden woods, was one of the most thrilling discords, "and yet," he adds, "if you had a discriminating ear, there were in it the elements of a concord such as these plains never saw nor heard."

Inspired by this optimistic faith, Thoreau inculcates, more strongly perhaps than any other writer, a sense of content in one's own personality—"a living dog is better," so he tells us, "than a dead lion." He would have each individual develop quietly according to his own capacity and conditions. "I think nothing is to be hoped from you," he says, "if this bit of mould under your feet is not sweeter to you than any other in this world or in any world." To waste no time in brooding over the past, but to live in the present, and nourish unbounded confidence in the future—this was the essence of his practical philosophy; and for support in this creed, and refreshment in the weaker moments of life, he looked to the unfailing health and beneficence, as he considered it, of wild nature. "In society you will not find health, but in nature. Unless our feet at least stood in the midst of nature, all our faces would be pale and livid. Society is always diseased,

and the best is the most so. There is no scent in it so wholesome as that of the pines, nor any fragrance so penetrating and restorative as the life-everlasting on high pastures. To him who contemplates a trait of natural beauty no harm nor disappointment can come. The doctrines of despair, of spiritual or political tyranny or servitude, were never taught by such as shared the serenity of nature." He was of opinion that man is "altogether too much insisted on in our views of the universe," and he dissents from the poet's maxim that "the proper study of mankind is man." "I say, study to forget all that; take wider views of the universe. That is the egotism of the race."

This calm, optimistic nature-worship mainly determined Thoreau's attitude towards the religious sects, whose "snappish tenacity" and faint-hearted craving for external comfort and grace were in direct contrast to his own absolute self-possession. "Who are the religious?" he says. "They who do not differ much from mankind generally, except that they are more conservative and timid and useless, but who in their conversation and correspondence talk about kindness and Heavenly Father, instead of going bravely about their business, trusting God even." "Really there is no infidelity nowadays," he wrote in the *Week*, "so great as that which prays, and keeps the Sabbath, and rebuilds the churches. The church is a sort of hospital for men's souls, and as full of quackery as the hospital

for their bodies. Those who are taken into it live like pensioners in their Retreat or Sailors' Snug Harbor, where you may see a row of religious cripples sitting outside in sunny weather. Let not the apprehension that he may one day have to occupy a ward therein discourage the cheerful labors of the able-souled man." He confidently expressed his opinion that "the practical faith of all men belies the preacher's consolation"; and that "nothing is so much to be feared as fear—atheism may, comparatively, be popular with God." In religion, as in philosophy, nature was the solid groundwork of his faith, and *out-of-doors* was his ritual. We are told by Mr. Sanborn that Thoreau's church of the "Sunday Walkers," or "Walden Pond Association," as it was jocosely called, came to be recognised by the village gossips as one of the religious institutions of Concord; and Thoreau has himself recorded how he was once reproved for ascending a mountain on a Sunday by a minister "who was driving a poor beast to a meeting-house," though, as he says, he would have gone farther than his monitor "to hear a true word spoken on that or any day." "I am convinced," he writes in his journal, "that there is no very important difference between a New Englander's religion and a Roman's. We both worship in the shadow of our sins. Superstition has always reigned. It is absurd to think that these farmers, dressed in their Sunday clothes, proceeding to church, differ essentially in this re-

spect from the Roman peasantry. They have merely changed the name and the number of their gods."

It may be imagined that the spirit of "defiant pantheism," as Horace Greeley called it, which breathes through all Thoreau's utterances on the subject of religion, and especially through the magnificent passage in the chapter on "Sunday" in the *Week*, must have caused him, and still causes him, to be mistrusted and misunderstood in so-called religious circles. It has been truly remarked of him that "he creates as much consternation among the saints as the sinners." Yet his unsparing candour and epigrammatic incisiveness of speech ought not to blind his readers to the fact that it was the very depth and sincerity of his religious sentiment that caused him to set all forms and dogmas at defiance. "While he used in his writings," says Emerson, "a certain petulance of remark in reference to churches or churchmen, he was a person of a rare, tender, and absolute religion, a person incapable of any profanation, by act or by thought. Of course the same isolation which belonged to his original thinking and living detached him from the social religious forms. This is neither to be censured nor regretted." It sometimes chanced that one of Thoreau's more orthodox fellow-citizens would attempt to entrap him in a conversation on religious topics, and on one of these occasions, when he was asked to state his opinion on the immortality

of the soul and the conditions of a future world, he is said to have replied, "Those were voluntaries I did not take." He would not allow his attention to be diverted from the paramount importance of this present life. Yet his belief in immortality is stated by his friends to have been firm and constant; and that he recognised the guidance of some overruling intelligence may be inferred from the following passage of *Walden*:

"As I stand over the insect crawling amid the pine needles on the forest floor, and endeavouring to conceal itself from my sight, and ask myself why it will cherish those humble thoughts, and hide its head from me who might, perhaps, be its benefactor, and impart to its race some cheering information, I am reminded of the greater Benefactor and Intelligence that stands over me, the human insect."

To follow the leading of the ideal was Thoreau's religion; and *sin*, whatever it might mean for other people, was to him simply the failure in this course. "Sin, I am sure, is not in overt act, or indeed in acts of any kind, but is in proportion to the time which has come behind us and displaced eternity, to the degree in which our elements are mixed with the elements of the world. The whole duty of life is implied in the question, how to respire and aspire both at once." So he wrote in his journal when he was a young man of twenty-four, and the remainder of his life and the manner of his death alike bear witness to the absolute sincerity of his convictions.

What, then, was the practical effect of these

idealistic aspirations on Thoreau's ethical teaching? In the first place, he is an earnest and unwearied advocate of self-culture and self-respect, and insists again and again on the need of preserving our higher and nobler instincts from the contamination of what is base, trivial, and worldly; body and mind must both be exercised into purity and vigour, and carefully safeguarded against sloth, vice, and disease. "How watchful we must be to keep the crystal well clear, that it be not made turbid by our contact with the world, so that it will not reflect objects. If I would preserve my relation to nature, I must make my life more moral, more pure and innocent. The problem is as precise and simple as a mathematical one. I must not live loosely, but more and more continently. How can we expect a harvest of thought who have not had a seed-time of character?" The extreme delicacy of Thoreau's nature—a delicacy which was sensitive almost to fastidiousness—may be seen in the sharp and perhaps too arbitrary contrast which he sometimes draws between the spiritual and the animal instincts, and especially in the tone of his remarks on the subject of love. "The intercourse of the sexes," he says, "I have dreamed is incredibly beautiful, too fair to be remembered. I have had thoughts about it, but they are among the most fleeting and irrecoverable in my experience. It is strange that men will talk of miracles, revelation, inspiration, and the like as things past while love remains. Some have

asked if the stock of men could not be improved—if they could not be bred as cattle. Let love be purified, and all the rest will follow. A pure love is thus indeed the panacea for all the ills of the world.”

In like manner, from an intellectual point of view, the mind must be kept secure from the debilitating and distracting influences of conventionality and gossip. This point is emphasised in the remarkable essay on *Life without Principle*, which expresses a good many of Thoreau’s most cherished convictions :

“Not without a slight shudder at the danger, I often perceive how near I had come to admitting into my mind the details of some trivial affair—the news of the street ; and I am astonished to observe how willing men are to lumber their minds with such rubbish—to permit idle rumours and incidents of the most insignificant kind to intrude on ground which should be sacred to thought. Shall the mind be a public arena, where the affairs of the street and the gossip of the tea-table chiefly are discussed ? Or shall it be a quarter of heaven itself—an hypæthral temple, consecrated to the service of the gods ? I find it so difficult to dispose of the few facts which to me are significant, that I hesitate to burden my mind with those which are insignificant. Such is, for the most part, the news in newspapers and conversation. It is important to preserve the mind’s chastity in this respect.

“I believe that the mind can be permanently profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things, so that our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality. Our very intellect shall be macadamised, as it were, its foundation broken into fragments for the wheels of travel to roll over ; and if you would know what will make the most durable pavement, surpassing rolled stones, spruce blocks, and asphaltum, you have only to look into some of our minds which have been subjected to this treatment so long. If we have

thus desecrated ourselves—as who has not?—the remedy will be by wariness and devotion to reconsecrate ourselves, and make once more a fane of the mind. We should treat our minds, that is ourselves, as innocent and ingenuous children, whose guardians we are, and be careful what objects and what subjects we thrust on their attention. Read not the Times. Read the Eternities. Conventionalities are at length as bad as impurities. Even the facts of science may dust the mind by their dryness, unless they are in a sense effaced each morning, or rather rendered fertile by the dews of fresh and living truth.”

The eager self-seeking restlessness of modern society, with its ignorance or disregard of the claims of thoughtful repose, was summed up for Thoreau in the word “business.” Nothing, in his opinion, not even crime, is so much opposed to the poetry of life as business,—it is “a negation” of life itself. Yet, as has already been said, the leisure which he advocated as essential to the well-being of every man was very different from idleness; indeed there have been few writers who, both in word and deed, have exhibited the value of time more powerfully than Thoreau. “Nothing must be postponed,” he says; “take time by the forelock, now or never. You must live in the present, launch yourself on any wave; find your eternity in each moment. Fools stand on their island opportunities, and look toward another land. There is no other land, there is no life but this or the like of this. Where the good husbandman is, there is the good soil. Take any other course, and life will be a succession of regrets.”

If he rejected business in its commercial and

money-making aspect, he none the less recognised that hard work is as important a discipline for the mind and morals as exercise is for the body, and that those who fail to support themselves by their own labour are doing a wrong both to themselves and others. "Merely to come into the world the heir of a fortune is not to be born, but to be still-born, rather. To be supported by the charity of friends, or a Government pension, by whatever fine synonyms you described these relations, is to go into the almshouse." For the same reason he urges on students and men of sedentary habits the advisability of taking a share in the simple common labours of everyday life, asserting that "the student who secures his coveted leisure and retirement by systematically shirking any labor necessary to man obtains but an ignoble and unprofitable leisure, defrauding himself of the experience which alone can make leisure fruitful." "If I devote myself," he says, "to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first that he may pursue his contemplations too."

We see, then, that Thoreau's first demand is for leisure and elbow-room, that each individual mind, instead of being crushed and warped in the struggle of life, may have space to develop its own distinctive qualities and follow the bent of its own natural temperament. Never has there lived a more determined and unalterable individualist. Every-

thing, according to his maxims, must be examined ; nothing must be taken on trust ; he was, as Emerson calls him, " a protestant *à l'outrance*," and unhesitatingly rejected many customs which are supposed to have the sanction of experience and tradition. He declared that after living some thirty years on this planet he had yet to hear a word of valuable advice from his elders. When a young man of his acquaintance professed a desire to adopt his mode of life, his answer was that he would have each one find out and pursue *his own* way, and not that of his father or his neighbour. " Why should we ever go abroad," he writes in his letters, " even across the way, to ask our neighbor's advice ? There is a nearer neighbor within us incessantly telling us how we should behave."

This stubbornly individualistic and independent cast of mind, which so largely determined the course of his life, has left its trace on every page of his writings. To sit on a pumpkin and have it all to oneself is better, he tells us, than to be crowded on a velvet cushion ; the gregariousness of men is " their most contemptible and discouraging aspect." He expresses little faith in the advantages to be derived (at any rate, in the New England of that time) from co-operation, holding that " the only co-operation which is commonly possible is exceedingly partial and superficial," while, on the other hand, " the man who goes alone can start to-day "—the individual not being dependent on the whims and prejudices of his

neighbour. It must not be supposed, however, that he wholly ignored the possibility of wise co-operation—on the contrary, he expressly states in *Walden*, when advocating the adoption of a better system of village education, that “to act collectively is according to the spirit of our institutions”; and in the account of his Canadian tour, when he describes the machine-like regularity with which the troops at Montreal went through their drill in the Champ de Mars, he exclaims that a true co-operation and harmony might be possible, “if men could combine thus earnestly and patiently and harmoniously to some really worthy end.” But this seems to have been nothing more than a distant anticipation; under present conditions he considered that the best hope of society lay in the progress and gradual perfecting of the individual man by his own internal effort. At a time when Fourier’s doctrines had obtained great hold in New England, and when various schemes of co-operative associations, by which society was to be entirely reorganised and regenerated, were being eagerly discussed, it was inevitable that so shrewd and practical a thinker as Thoreau should—in spite of his idealism—fall back more and more on what he considered the solid basis of individual independence. This view is stated very clearly in his criticism of a volume entitled *Paradise within the Reach of all Men*, in which the magical results of co-operation had been depicted in glowing colours :

"Alas! this is the crying sin of the age, this want of faith in the prevalence of a man. Nothing can be effected but by one man. He who wants help wants everything. True, this is the condition of our weakness, but it can never be the means of our recovery. We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together. We trust that the social movements which we witness indicate an aspiration not to be thus cheaply satisfied. In this matter of reforming the world we have little faith in corporations; not thus was it first formed."

Closely connected with this uncompromising individualism are Thoreau's anarchist doctrines. He regards all established government as, at best, a necessary evil, which we must tolerate as we can during the present transitional phase of human society, knowing well that the ultimate condition of mankind will be, like the primitive, one of individual liberty. Politics he set aside as "unreal, incredible, and insignificant"; "blessed are the young," was his new version of the Beatitudes, "for they do not read the President's Message." "What is wanted," he declared, "is men, not of policy, but of probity,—who recognise a higher law than the Constitution or the decision of the majority. The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls—the worst man is as strong as the best at that game; it does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning. . . ." For the same reasons he expressed a strong dislike of the general tone of the American press, which he considered,

with a few exceptions, to be venal and time-serving. In at least two of his essays, the *Plea for Captain John Brown* and *Slavery in Massachusetts*, this feeling finds an outlet in a fierce philippic against the hireling journals which did not scruple to use their utmost influence in the service of the slave-holding party.

Yet here too, as elsewhere, there is a danger of exaggerating the extent of Thoreau's lack of sympathy with contemporary modes of thought. It is true he preaches anarchism and civil disobedience; yet, under a rough exterior, he loved his country well, and in his peculiar way was perhaps as patriotic a citizen as any to be found in Massachusetts. He admits that the American Government, though not an ideal one, is good enough when viewed from a lower than the ideal standpoint, and more than once expresses his own desire to be a peaceable and law-abiding citizen. Moreover, in spite of his contempt for politics and politicians, he does not deny that "countless reforms are called for," and shows that he is aware that the condition of the working classes is destined to be the paramount question of the age. But all his social doctrines point finally to this end—that the path must be left clear for the free development of individual character. "There will never be a really free and enlightened State," he says, "until the State comes to recognise the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived,

and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose, if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow-men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, but not yet anywhere seen."

Society then is to be reformed, according to Thoreau's doctrine, by individual effort, and the gospel which he preaches to the individual is that of simplicity. Simplification of life (by which is meant a questioning, and perhaps rejection, of the various artificial "comforts" and luxuries, and a dependence only on the actual necessities—food, shelter, clothing, and fuel) is repeatedly advocated by Thoreau, from his own practical experience, as lending strength, courage, and self-reliance to the individual character, and so, in proportion to the extent of its practice, to the State. The following passage from *Walden* contains the essence of his teaching on this most important point:

"Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three,

and not a hundred or a thousand ; instead of a million count half-a-dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nails. . . . The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way, are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture, and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land ; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan severity of life and elevation of purpose."

It must be repeated that this doctrine, however strange and unpalatable it may be to the popular mood, is not that of an ascetic. The simplicity which Thoreau inculcates does not, like asceticism, renounce the luxuries of life by way of a religious penance, but because it is convinced that life, on the whole, is healthier and happier without them. What he urges is not that men should deny themselves certain comforts while they still believe them to be comforts, but that in each case they should test the truth by the criterion of practical experience, and not continue to regard as necessities many things which a day's trial would prove to be superfluous and perhaps actually harmful. This distinction between a natural taste and an acquired habit is a vital one, yet it is generally overlooked by the opponents of Thoreau's philosophy. He laughs at the absurdity of those writers who talk of the usefulness of "artificial wants" in drawing out the resources of nature, since every artificial want must of necessity bring with it its own Nemesis of pro-

portionally increased toil ; whereas, on the contrary, the practice of hardihood and frugality is productive of health, independence, and restfulness both to body and mind. In a word, the simplicity which he preaches is based not on the repression, but rather on the better gratification, of the true pleasures of existence. Which is the more enjoyable to indulge—the spiritual instincts or the sensual? Let each man make his own choice ; but let him at least be sure that he *is* really following his own tastes, and not merely conforming to the dictates of custom and tradition.

The charge often made against Thoreau, that he is in opposition to the course of modern progress, and prefers savagery to civilisation, is only tenable on a very short-sighted and perfunctory view of the meaning of his gospel. He himself notes in his diary that his lectures used to call forth such inquiries as “Would you have us return to the savage state?”—a misconception of his meaning which was doubtless rendered more general by his brevity of speech, epigrammatic tone, and characteristic unwillingness to explain himself. But a careful study of his writings as a whole, and of *Walden* in particular, can leave us in no doubt as to his true position on this point. He expressly states his belief that civilisation is a real advance in the condition of mankind, and that the farmer displaces the Indian “because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural.”

But, while making this admission, he points out what is too often overlooked by comfortable statisticians, that, though the majority of civilised men are better situated than the savage, there is a minority which is not so. "Perhaps it will be found," he says, "that just in proportion as some have been placed in outward circumstances above the savage, others have been degraded below him. The luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another. On the one side is the palace, on the other are the almshouse and silent poor. It is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilisation exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of savages." He asserts, then, that the problem to which we should apply ourselves is how "to combine the hardiness of the savage with the intellectualness of the civilised man." When he inveighs against the numerous follies, and defects, and diseases observable in civilisation, he does so, not because he doubts or denies its superiority to the savage state, but because (to quote his own words) he wishes "to show at what a sacrifice this advantage is at present obtained, and to suggest that we may possibly so live as to secure all the advantage without suffering any of the disadvantage."

In the same connection it should be noted that Thoreau exhibits no reactionary feeling against the strides made by science and modern mechanical

invention, however strongly he may protest against the unnecessary desecration of natural scenery. He descants on the enterprise, courage, and alertness of commerce, which goes steadily on its path undismayed and unhindered by the obstacles of climate and season, and declares that it cheered him in his Walden hermitage when he heard the train rattle past each morning on its road to Boston. All he desiderates is a worthier object as the end and aim of so much toil and industry. "If all," he exclaims, "were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends! If the cloud that hangs over the engine were the perspiration of heroic deeds, or as beneficent as that which floats over the farmer's fields, then the elements and nature herself would cheerfully accompany men on their errands and be their escort." Nor was he, as some have supposed, an enemy to art, though he may have been, as Emerson says, "insensible to some fine traits of culture." He did not wish to banish ornament from our dwellings, except such as is external and superficial, a mere conventional and fashionable appendage, instead of what it should be, a simple and natural growth. "What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder—out of some unconscious truthfulness and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance; and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined

to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life. The most interesting dwellings in this country, as the painter knows, are the most unpretending humble log-huts and cottages of the poor commonly ; it is the life of the inhabitants whose shells they are, and not any peculiarity in these surfaces merely, that makes them *picturesque* ; and equally interesting will be the citizen's suburban box when his life shall be as simple and agreeable to the imagination, and there is as little straining after effect in the style of his dwelling."

It may here be worth while to inquire how far these principles of individualism and simplicity were meant by Thoreau to be applied, and how far they were rightly applicable, to the social question of his time. There is no indication whatever in any of his writings that he intended his doctrines to be understood, directly and literally, as containing a panacea for human ills ; he did not wish his fellow-beings to leave their towns and villages in order to live in shanties, nor was he under the impression, as some of his critics would have us believe, that the inhabitants of crowded cities were free to march out and live in blissful seclusion in some neighbouring wood. Thoreau, whatever the limitations of his genius may have been, was a shrewd and clear-sighted man ; and if any of his readers find themselves attributing to him such ineptitudes as those just mentioned, they may feel assured that the misunderstanding is on their own side, and that by lack of sympathy

they have failed to grasp his true meaning. It should be remembered that he wrote primarily and immediately for his own fellow-citizens of Concord and a limited New England audience ; and, further, that the social problem was far less difficult and complex at that time in New England than it is now after a lapse of thirty or forty years. Extreme poverty was a rare exception and not a normal condition among the peasantry of Concord ; there was far more elbow-room and opportunity for individual effort than in an English country town, so that an example such as that set by Thoreau was not by any means the impossibility which it would have been in other places and under other circumstances. As a matter of fact, he seldom recommended his own way of living to his neighbours or fellow-townsmen, being convinced that each man must shape his own career ; though in one or two cases, as in the conversation with a thriftless Irish labourer, recorded in *Walden*, we find him pointing out the advantages of a frugal diet, since those who can dispense with tea, coffee, butter, milk, and flesh-meat can also spare themselves the heavy labour which is required to purchase these unnecessary "comforts." But in so far as Thoreau addressed his doctrines to the general public, it was distinctly not with the intent of persuading them to live as he did, but in the hope of stimulating independent thought by the force of his example and admonition, and of drawing attention to those simple common-sense principles of

frugality and hardihood without which there can be no lasting health or contentment either for individual or community.

It has been remarked of Thoreau that in his whole works one can find no trace of pity.¹ If it were possible at all to maintain this assertion, it could only be in the limited sense that he dwells usually on the iniquity of the wrong-doer rather than on the feelings of the sufferer; he does not, for instance, *express* his pity for the slave (though we know from the accounts already quoted how strong his pity was), but he shows it in a more practical form by his attitude towards the slaveholder. In the case of animals, however, the statement is absolutely groundless, for the traces of Thoreau's pity for animal suffering are quite unmistakable. It is true that, with his characteristic dislike of system, he disclaims any distinct theory of compassion, while his optimistic belief in the beneficence of nature prevents him from repining at the mere existence of suffering and wrong. "I love," he says, "to see that nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another. . . . With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear

¹ R. L. Stevenson : *Men and Books*.

to be stereotyped." Nevertheless, Thoreau is himself one of the humanest of writers, and has contributed to the literature of humanitarianism some of its most striking protests. His detestation of war was shown in his refusal to pay the poll-tax at the time when the United States made an unjustifiable attack on Mexico. He declares fighting to be "a damnable business," and at variance with the will and conscience of those compelled to engage in it—"soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, powder-monkeys, and all." Of his opinions concerning slaveholding it is not necessary to say more; but there is a remarkable saying of his about John Brown which deserves to be quoted in this connection. Noting the fact that Brown had not received a college education, but had studied Liberty in "the great University of the West," he adds: "Such were his *humanities*, and not any study of grammar. He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man." It would be well if all our professors and students of *literæ humaniores* would lay this admirable sentiment to heart.

I have stated that Thoreau was, or seemed to be, in some relations unsympathetic. Among his most marked antipathies must be counted the strong dislike he felt for professional "philanthropy." "What a foul subject," he says in his *Letters*, "is this of doing good, instead of minding one's life, which should be his business; doing good as a dead

carcass, which is only fit for manure, instead of as a living man,—instead of taking care to flourish, and smell, and taste sweet, and refresh all mankind to the extent of our capacity and quality. If I ever *did* a man any good, in their sense, of course it was something exceptional and insignificant compared with the good or evil which I am constantly doing by being what I am." Humane though he was, he felt that philanthropy "is not love for one's fellow-man in the broadest sense"; not the flower and fruit of a man's character, but only the stem and leaves; not the constant superfluity of his benevolence, but a "partial and transitory act" in which there is frequently too large an admixture of self-consciousness. "There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root, and it may be that he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the most by his mode of life to produce the misery which he strives in vain to relieve. Some show their kindness to the poor by employing them in their kitchens. Would they not be kinder if they employed themselves there? . . . If you have ever been betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing. Rescue the drowning and tie your shoe-strings. Take your time and set about some free labour." The sharpness of tone in Thoreau's remarks on this subject may perhaps be pardoned him, in view of the

real insight and wisdom which are indicated by his words.

Humanity to animals was one of the most conspicuous virtues in Thoreau's character, and is constantly, if indirectly, advocated in his writings. His conception of the animal races has been described as "a sort of mystic evolution." "If we take the ages into account," he says, "may there not be a civilisation going on among brutes as well as men?" Thus he regards the foxes as "rudimental burrowing men, still standing on their defence, awaiting their transformation"; while the dog is to the fox as the white man to the red. The horse appears to him as a human being in a humble state of existence, and the human way in which the oxen behave when loosed from the yoke at evening affects him pathetically. The wild shaggy moose in the Maine forests are "moose-men, clad in a sort of Vermont gray or homespun," and he expresses respect even for the skunk, for its suggested resemblance to one of the human aborigines of the country. Individuality is recognised and respected by Thoreau in the non-human no less than the human races; he complains of man's "not educating the horse, not trying to develop his nature, but merely getting work out of him." It was this sense of brotherhood, as I have already remarked, which gave Thoreau his extraordinary power over beasts and birds; and his singular humanity to animals is due to the same source. "No humane being," he says, "past the

age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure as he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not always make the usual *philanthropic* distinctions." It has been recorded by Emerson that when some one urged a vegetable diet, Thoreau, true to his contradictory humour, "thought all diets a very small matter, and that the man who shoots the buffalo lives better than the man who boards at the Graham House." Yet he was himself during a great part of his life a vegetarian in practice, and has thus stated his opinion concerning the humanities of diet :

"It may be vain to ask why the imagination will not be reconciled to flesh and fat. I am satisfied that it is not. Is it not a reproach that man is a carnivorous animal? True, he can and does live, in a great measure, by preying on other animals, but this is a miserable way, as any one who will go to snaring rabbits, or slaughtering lambs, may learn, and he will be regarded as a benefactor of his race who shall teach man to confine himself to a more innocent and wholesome diet. Whatever my own practice may be, I have no doubt that it is a part of the destiny of the human race, in its gradual improvement, to leave off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilised."

Here, as in other points, Thoreau did not trouble himself on the score of absolute consistency either in his practice or theory. He has recorded in the *Week* how, when his brother and he were sitting down to an outdoor repast, a sudden compunction fell upon them for the pigeon they had slaughtered

for their dinner. "It did not seem to be putting this bird to its right use to pluck off its feathers and extract its entrails, and broil its carcass on the coals ; but we heroically persevered, nevertheless, waiting for further information. The same regard for nature which excited our sympathy for her creatures nerved our hands to carry through what we had begun." This seeming inconsistency is explained by the chapter in *Walden*, entitled "Higher Laws," in which he recognises *two* instincts in the human mind, one towards a higher, or spiritual, mode of life, the other towards a primitive, rank, and savage one, and declares that he reverences them both ; "the wild not less than the good." But, on the whole, the tendency of his writings is strongly in the direction of an enlarged sympathy and increasing humaneness. "His religion," says Alcott, "was of the most primitive type, inclusive of all creatures and things, even to the sparrow that falls to the ground—though never by shot of his."

His position as a naturalist was strongly influenced by the same humane sentiments. His methods were not those of the anatomist and man of science ; he held that "nature must be viewed humanly to be viewed at all, that is, her scenes must be associated with humane affections" ; she was to him a living entity, to be loved and revered, and not a subject for cold and unimpassioned observation. He thus states in his journal the cause of his

divergence from the recognised scientific system. "I think the most important requisite in describing an animal is to be sure that you give its character and spirit, for in that you have, without error, the sum and effect of all its parts known and unknown. You must tell what it is to man. Surely the most important part of an animal is its *anima*, its vital spirit, on which is based its character and all the particulars by which it most concerns us. Yet most scientific books which treat of animals leave this out altogether, and what they describe are, as it were, phenomena of dead matter." "What is man," he says elsewhere, "is all in all; nature nothing but as she draws him out and reflects him." Accordingly in his remarks on nature and natural history there is a decided prevalence of that peculiarly introspective and moralising mood, characteristic of the poet-naturalist as distinct from the scientist, which seeks to transmute the mere facts and results of external observation into symbolical thoughts and images which may illustrate the life of man. "The fact is," says Thoreau himself, "I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot"; and this is certainly the impression which is conveyed by the mystic speculative tone which everywhere pervades the diaries in which he jotted down the results of his daily observation. It is this human self-consciousness that differentiates Thoreau from the naturalist and observer pure and simple, such as Gilbert White. It has been remarked by

Mr. John Burroughs¹ that it was super-natural rather than natural history that Thoreau studied, and that he made no discoveries of importance in the scientific field because he looked *through* nature instead of *at* her, and was "more intent on the natural history of his own thought than on that of the bird."

It is no doubt true that Thoreau's keenness of vision was generally in proportion to the interest of the subject with which he had to deal; he saw what he already had in mind. As he himself remarks, "objects are concealed from our view, not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray, as because we do not bring our minds and eyes to bear on them, for there is no power to see in the eye itself, any more than in any other jelly; we cannot see anything till we are possessed with the idea of it." His observations, however, are not the less important because they differ from those acquired by the ordinary method; on the contrary, they are more valuable on that account, inasmuch as the poet is higher and rarer than the naturalist. Nathaniel Hawthorne has recorded how Thoreau was enabled by this inner faculty to see the water-lily as few others could see it; "he has beheld beds of them unfolding in due succession as the sunrise stole gradually from flower to flower—a sight not to be hoped for, unless when a poet adjusts his inward

¹ *The Century*, July 1882

eye to a proper focus with the outward organ." "His power of observation," says Emerson, "seemed to indicate additional senses. He saw as with microscope, heard as with ear-trumpet, and his memory was a photographic register of all he saw and heard. And yet none knew better than he that it is not the fact that imports, but the impression or effect of the fact on your mind. Every fact lay in glory in his mind, a type of the order and beauty of the whole." This idealistic quality constitutes the peculiar property of Thoreau's teaching on the subject of nature; but that it did not disqualify him for doing good service as a scientific observer may be gathered from the remarkable tribute which has recently been paid to him by one of Darwin's followers and interpreters:

"Like no one else, he knew the meaning of every note and movement of bird and beast, and fish and insect. Born out of due time, just too early for the great change in men's views of nature which transferred all interest in outer life from the mere dead things one sees in museums to their native habits and modes of living, he was yet in some sort a vague and mystical anticipatory precursor of the modern school of functional biologists. . . . Page after page of his diary notes facts about the pollen showers of pine-trees, the fertilisation of skunk-cabbage, the nesting of birds, the preferences of mink or musk-rat, the courtship of butterflies, all of a piece with those minute observations on which naturalists nowadays build their most interesting theories."¹

The conclusion of our view of Thoreau's doctrines thus brings us back to the contention with which we

¹ Grant Allen, *Fortnightly Review*, May 1888.

started. He was an idealist who looked through the outer husk and surface of life, and saw the true reality in what to most men is but a vision and a dream. He had in large measure what Emerson calls "the philosopher's perception of identity"; the phenomena of time and space did not affect him—Walden Pond was to him an Atlantic Ocean, a moment was eternity. "Shams and delusions," he says, "are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights entertainment. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence—that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadows of the reality. I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do, because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that *is* which *appears* to be." The means on which he relies for the correction of this state of delusion are the independence of the individual mind, and those simple, practical modes of living which alone can render a man independent. Finally, for all his asperity of tone in the reproof of what he considered to be blameworthy, he was a firm believer in the gradual progress and ultimate

renovation of mankind, being convinced that improvement is "the only excuse for reproduction." It was no cynical or misanthropic faith that found expression in the concluding passage of his *Walden*:

"Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb,—heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man as they sat round the festive board,—may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society's most trivial and handselled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!"

CHAPTER X

WRITINGS

THE lack of system which is noticeable in Thoreau's character may be traced in the style of his writings as plainly as in his philosophical views. He was not careful as to the outer form and finish of his works, for he believed that the mere literary contour is of quite secondary importance in comparison with the inner animating spirit; let the worthiness of the latter once be assured, and the former will fall naturally into its proper shape. "As for style of writing," he says, "if one has anything to say, it drops from him simply and directly, as a stone falls to the ground. There are no two ways about it, but down it comes, and he may stick in the points and stops wherever he can get a chance. New ideas come into this world somewhat like falling meteors, with a flash and an explosion, and perhaps somebody's castle roof perforated. To try to polish the stone in its descent, to give it a peculiar turn, and make it whistle a tune, perchance, would be of no use, if it were possible. Your polished stuff turns

out not to be meteoric, but of this earth." Furthermore, although, as we have seen, writing was more and more recognised by him as his profession in his later years, he was at all times conscious of a fuller and higher calling than that of the literary man—as he valued nature before art, so he valued life before literature. He both preached and practised a combination of literary work and manual ; of the pen and of the spade ; of the study and of the open sky. He protested against that tendency in our civilisation which carries division of labour to such an extent that the student is deprived of healthy outdoor work while the labourer is deprived of opportunity for self-culture. He imagines the case of some literary professor, who sits in his library writing a treatise on the huckleberry, while hired huckleberry-pickers and cooks are engaged in the task of preparing him a pudding of the berries. A book written under such conditions will be worthless. "There will be none of the spirit of the huckleberry in it. I believe in a different kind of division of labor, and that the professor should divide himself between the library and the huckleberry field." His opinions on the subject of literary style are clearly stated in the *Week*, and are no doubt in great measure a record of his own practice :

"Can there be any greater reproach than an idle learning? Learn to split wood at least. The necessity of labor and conversation with many men and things to the scholar is rarely well

remembered ; steady labor with the hands, which engrosses the attention also, is unquestionably the best method of removing palaver and sentimentality out of one's style, both of speaking and writing. If he has worked hard from morning till night, though he may have grieved that he could not be watching the train of his thoughts during that time, yet the few hasty lines which at evening record his day's experience will be more musical and true than his freest but idle fancy could have furnished. Surely the writer is to address a world of laborers, and such therefore must be his own discipline. He will not idly dance at his work who has wood to cut and cord before nightfall in the short days of winter, but every stroke will be husbanded, and ring soberly through the wood ; and so will the strokes of that scholar's pen, which at evening record the story of the day, ring soberly, yet cheerily, on the ear of the reader, long after the echoes of his axe have died away."

Such were, in fact, the conditions under which Thoreau wrote many of the pages of the journal from which his own essays were constructed ; and, whatever may be thought of the validity of the general principle enunciated by him, there can be no doubt that in his particular instance the result was singularly felicitous. It was his pleasure and his determination that his writing should be redolent of the open-air scenery by which it was primarily inspired. "I trust," he says of the *Week* (and the same may be said of all his volumes), "it does not smell so much of the study and library, even of the poet's attic, as of the fields and woods ; that it is a hypæthral or unroofed book, lying open under the ether, and permeated by it, open to all weathers, not easy to be kept on a shelf." In this way Thoreau added a new flavour to literature by the unstudied

freshness and wildness of his tone, and succeeded best where he made least effort to be successful. "It is only out of the fulness of thinking," says Mr. R. L. Stevenson, "that expression drops perfect like a ripe fruit; and when Thoreau wrote so nonchalantly at his desk, it was because he had been vigorously active during his walk." Even Mr. Lowell, a far less friendly critic, is compelled, on this point, to express his admiration. "With every exception, there is no writing comparable with Thoreau's in kind that is comparable with it in degree, where it is best. His range was narrow, but to be a master is to be a master. There are sentences of his as perfect as anything in the language, and thoughts as clearly crystallised; his metaphors and images are always fresh from the soil."

This success, although naturally and unconsciously attained, had of course been rendered possible in the first instance by an honest course of study, for Thoreau, like every other master of literary expression, had passed through his strict apprenticeship of intellectual labour. Though comparatively indifferent to modern languages, he was familiar with the best classical writers of Greece and Rome, and his style was formed on models drawn from one of the great eras in English literature—that of the quaint simple "worthies" of the later Elizabethan period. It is a noticeable fact that "mother-tongue" was a word which he loved to use

even in his college days; and the homely native vigour of his own writings was largely due to the sympathetic industry with which he had laboured in these quiet but fertile fields. Nor must it be supposed, because he did not elaborate his style according to the conventional canons, that he was a careless or indolent writer—on the contrary, it was his habit to correct his manuscripts with unfailing diligence. “No labor,” says Channing, “was too onerous, no material too costly, if outlaid on the right enterprise.” He deliberately examined and re-examined each sentence of his journal before admitting it into the essays which he sent to the printer, finding that a certain lapse of time was necessary before he could arrive at a satisfactory critical decision. “Whatever has been produced on the spur of the moment will bear,” he thinks, “to be reconsidered and reformed with phlegm. The arrow had best not be loosely shot. The most transient and passing remark must be reconsidered by the writer, made sure and warranted, as if the earth had rested on its axle to back it, and all the natural forces lay behind it. If you foresee that a part of your essay will topple down after the lapse of time, throw it down now yourself.” His absolute sincerity showed itself as clearly in the style of his writing as in the manner of his life. “The one great rule of composition—and if I were a professor of rhetoric I should insist on this—is to *speak the truth*. This first, this second, this third, pebbles in your mouth or

not. This demands earnestness and manhood chiefly."

In his choice of subjects it was the common that most often enlisted his sympathy and attention. "The theme," he says, "is nothing ; the life is everything. Give me simple, cheap, and homely themes. I omit the unusual—the hurricanes and earthquakes, and describe the common. This has the greatest charm, and is the true theme of poetry. Give me the obscure life, the cottage of the poor and humble, the work-days of the world, the barren fields." But while he took these as the subjects for his pen, he so idealised and transformed them by the power of his imagination as to present them in aspects altogether novel and unsuspected ; it being his delight to bring to view the latent harmony and beauty of all existent things, and thus indirectly to demonstrate the unity and perfection of nature. Take his treatment of the telegraph wires, for instance—a subject which might not have been expected to commend itself to the fancy of a poet whose favourite woods had been lately desecrated by the introduction of the railroad. Yet what writer has ever handled this theme as Thoreau has done ?

"As I went under the new telegraph wire, I heard it vibrating like a harp high overhead : it was as the sound of a far-off glorious life, a supernal life which came down to us and vibrated the lattice-work of this life of ours—an *Æolian* harp. A human soul is played on, even as this wire : I make my own use of the telegraph, without consulting the directors, like the sparrows, which,

I observe, use it extensively for a perch. Shall I not, too, go to this office? The sound proceeds from near the posts, where the vibration is apparently more rapid. It seemed to me as if every pore of the wood was filled with music. As I put my ear to one of the posts it labored with the strains, as if every fibre was affected, and being seasoned or timed, rearranged according to a new and more harmonious law: every swell and change and inflection of tone pervaded it, and seemed to proceed from the wood, the divine tree or wood, as if its very substance was transmuted.

"What a recipe for preserving wood, to fill its pores with music! How this wild tree from the forest, stripped of its bark and set up here, rejoices to transmit this music! When no melody proceeds from the wire, I hear the hum within the entrails of the wood, the oracular tree, acquiring, accumulating the prophetic fury. The resounding wood—how much the ancients would have made of it! To have had a harp on so great a scale, girdling the very earth, and played on by the winds of every latitude and longitude, and that harp were (so to speak) the manifest blessing of heaven on a work of man's! Shall we not now add a tenth muse to those immortal nine? . . .

"I hear the sound working terribly within. When I put my ear to it, anon it swells into a clear tone, which seems to concentrate in the core of the tree, for all the sound seems to proceed from the wood. It is as if you had entered some world-cathedral, resounding to some vast organ. I feel the very ground tremble underneath my feet as I stand near the post. What an awful and fateful music it must be to the worms in the wood! No better vermifuge were needed. As the wood of an old Cremona, its every fibre, perchance, harmoniously transposed and educated to resound melody, has brought a great price, so methinks these telegraph-posts should bear a great price with musical instrument makers. It is prepared to be the material of harps for ages to come; as it were, put a-soak in and seasoning in music."

Numerous passages might be selected from Thoreau's works which exhibit, in as high degree

as the one just quoted, the same picturesque and suggestive qualities. He had a poet's eye for all forms of beauty, moral and material alike, and for the subtle analogies that exist between the one class and the other—in a word, he was possessed of a most vivid and quickening imagination. His images and metaphors are bold, novel, and impressive (as when, to take but a couple of instances, he alludes to the lost anchors of vessels wrecked off the coast of Cape Cod as "the sunken faith and hope of mariners, to which they trusted in vain"; or describes the autumnal warmth on the sheltered side of Walden as "the still glowing embers which the summer, like a departing hunter, had left"); and, with all his simplicity and directness of speech, he has an unconscious, almost mystic, eloquence which stamps him unmistakably as an inspired writer, a man of true and rare genius. It has been well said of him that "he lived and died to transfuse external nature into human words." In this respect his position among prose-writers is unique; no one, unless it be Richard Jefferies, can be placed in the same category with him.

In so far as he studied the external form of his writings, the aim and object which Thoreau set before him may be summed up in one word—concentration. He avows his delight in sentences which are "concentrated and nutty—sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not report an

old but make a new impression; sentences which suggest on many things, and are as durable as a Roman aqueduct: to frame these—that is the *art* of writing. Sentences which are expressive, towards which so many volumes, so much life, went; which lie like boulders on the page up and down, or across; which contain the seed of other sentences, not mere repetition, but creation; and which a man might sell his ground or cattle to buy.” The distinctive features of his own literary style could not have been more accurately described. The brief, barbed, epigrammatic sentences which bristle throughout his writings, pungent with shrewd wisdom and humour, are the appropriate expression of his keen thrifty nature; there is not a superfluous word or syllable, but each passage goes straight to the mark, and tells its tale, as the work of a man who has some more urgent duty to perform than to adorn his pages with artificial tropes and embellishments. Like Emerson, he is fond of surprising and challenging his readers by the piquancy and strangeness of his utterances. His use of paradox was partly due to the same desire to stimulate and awaken curiosity, partly to his wayward and contradictory nature. “A certain habit of antagonism,” Emerson tells us, “defaced his earlier writings—a trick of rhetoric not quite outgrown in his later—of substituting for the obvious word and thought its diametrical opposite.” Thoreau, as we have seen, himself admitted this

fault in his private journal ; yet that he to some extent deliberately adopted, and was prepared to defend, his paradoxical tendency, is shown by several passages in his writings. "I trust," he writes in his *Letters*, "that you realise what an exaggerator I am—that I lay myself out to exaggerate whenever I have an opportunity—pile Pelion upon Ossa, to reach heaven so." And again, in *Walden*, he cheerfully pleads guilty to the charge of extravagance in his statements. "I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extravagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience. I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression." The dangers and demerits of a paradoxical style are sufficiently obvious ; and no writer has ever been less careful than Thoreau to safeguard himself against misunderstandings on this score. He has consequently been much misunderstood, and will always be so, save where the reader brings to his task a certain amount of sympathy and kindred sense of humour.

To those who are not gifted with the same philosophical sense of the inner identity that links together many things which are externally dissimilar and disproportionate, some of Thoreau's thoughts and sayings must necessarily appear to be a fair subject for ridicule. Yet that he should have been charged with possessing no humour would be inexplicable,

save for the fact that the definitions of that quality are so various and so vague. Broad wit and mirthful genial humour he certainly had not, and he confessedly disliked writings in which there is a conscious and deliberate attempt to be amusing. He found Rabelais, for instance, intolerable; "it may be sport to him," he says, "but it is death to us; a mere humorist, indeed, is a most unhappy man, and his readers are most unhappy also." But though he would not or could not recognise humour as a distinct and independent quality, and even attempted, as Channing tells us, to eliminate what he considered "levity" from some of his essays, he none the less enjoyed keenly—and himself unmistakably exhibited—the quiet, latent, unobtrusive humour which is one of the wholesome and saving principles of human life. "The more quiet," he thinks, "the more profound it is; even nature is observed to have her playful moods or aspects, of which man seems to be sometimes the sport." Among Thoreau's own writings, *Walden* is especially pervaded by this subtle sense of humour, grave, dry, pithy, sententious, almost saturnine in its tone, yet perhaps for that very reason the more racy and suggestive to those readers who have the faculty for appreciating it. What could possibly be more delicious, for instance (and it is only one instance out of many), than his chapter on the various "Visitors" who used occasionally to pay him a call at his woodland shanty?

"I had three chairs in my house ; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society. When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers there was but the third chair for them all, but they generally economised the room by standing up. It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof, and yet we often parted without being aware that we had come very near to one another. . . . If one guest came he sometimes partook of my frugal meal, and it was no interruption to conversation to be stirring a hasty-pudding, or watching the rising and maturing of a loaf of bread in the ashes, in the meanwhile. But if twenty came and sat in my house, there was nothing said about dinner—though there might be bread enough for two—more than if eating were a forsaken habit ; but we naturally practised abstinence ; and this was never felt to be an offence against hospitality, but the most proper and considerate course. The waste and decay of physical life, which so often needs repair, seemed miraculously retarded in such a case, and the vital vigor stood its ground. I could entertain thus a thousand as well as twenty ; and if any ever went away disappointed or hungry from my house when they found me at home, they may depend upon it that I sympathised with them at least. So easy is it, though many housekeepers doubt it, to establish new and better customs in the place of the old. You need not rest your reputation on the dinners you give. . . .

"Far off as I lived, I was not exempted from that annual visitation which occurs, methinks, about the first of April, when everybody is on the move ; and I had my share of good luck, though there were some curious specimens among my visitors. Half-witted men from the almshouse and elsewhere came to see me, but I endeavored to make them exercise all the wit they had, and make their confessions to me ; in such cases making wit the theme of our conversation ; and so was compensated. With respect to wit, I learned that there was not much difference between the half and the whole. One day, in particular, an inoffensive simple-minded pauper, whom with others I had often seen used as fencing stuff, standing or sitting on a bushel in the fields to keep cattle and himself from straying, visited me, and

expressed a wish to live as I did. He told me, with the utmost simplicity and truth, quite superior, or rather *inferior* to anything that is called humility, that he was 'deficient in intellect.' These were his words. The Lord had made him so, yet he supposed the Lord cared as much for him as for another. 'I have always been so,' said he, 'from my childhood; I never had much mind; I was not like other children; I am weak in the head. It was the Lord's will, I suppose.' And there he was to prove the truth of his words. He was a metaphysical puzzle to me. I have rarely met a fellow-man on such promising ground—it was so simple and sincere, and so true, all that he said. And, true enough, in proportion as he appeared to humble himself was he exalted. I did not know at first but it was the result of a wise policy. It seemed that from such a basis of truth and frankness as the poor weak-headed pauper had laid, our intercourse might go forward to something better than the intercourse of sages."

It has been remarked that it is impossible to classify Thoreau—"he cannot be called a man of science, he cannot be called a poet, he cannot even be called a prose poet."¹ If classification of any kind be desirable in the case of such a protestant and free-lance, he should probably be called an essayist with a strong didactic tendency. He could not, as his friend Channing observes, "mosaic" his essays, but preferred to give himself free play by throwing them into the narrative and autobiographical form. The *Week* and *Walden*, which were published in his lifetime, and three of the posthumous volumes—*Cape Cod*, *A Yankee in Canada*, and *The Maine Woods*—are all framed on this principle, a more or less slight record of personal experience being made the peg on which to hang a

¹ *Athenæum*, Oct. 1882.

great deal of ethical moralising and speculation. Apart from all questions of the value of the opinion advanced, the charm of those books lies mainly in their intellectual alertness, keen spiritual insight, and brilliant touches of picturesque description. Few authors have created such a rich store of terse felicitous apothegms, or have drawn such vivid and sympathetic sketches of natural scenery. Numerous examples of his laconic incisive utterances have already been incidentally quoted. Here is a characteristic open-air picture of a bright breezy day on the Concord river, where he spent so much of his time :

“ Many waves are there agitated by the wind, keeping nature fresh, the spray blowing in your face, reeds and rushes waving ; ducks by the hundred, all uneasy in the surf, in the raw wind, just ready to rise, and now going off with a clatter and a whistling like riggers straight for Labrador, flying against the stiff gale with reefed wings, or else circling round first with all their paddles briskly moving, just over the surf, to reconnoitre you before they leave these parts ; gulls wheeling overhead ; musk-rats swimming for dear life, wet and cold, with no fire to warm them by that you know of, their labored homes rising here and there like haystacks ; and countless mice and moles and winged titmice along the sunny windy shore ; cranberries tossed on the waves and heaving up on the beach, their little red skiffs beating about among the alders ;—such healthy natural tumult as proves the last day is not yet at hand. And there stand all around the alders and birches and oaks and maples full of glee and sap, holding in their buds until the waters subside.”¹

Here, too, to show the more human side of Thoreau's genius, is one of the picturesque character-

¹ *The Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers.*

sketches which are far from uncommon in his writings :

“ I can just remember an old brown-coated man who was the Walton of this stream, who had come over from Newcastle, England, with his son—the latter a stout and hearty man who had lifted an anchor in his day. A straight old man he was, who took his way in silence through the meadows, having passed the period of communication with his fellows ; his old experienced coat, hanging long and straight and brown as the yellow-pine bark, glittering with so much smothered sunlight, if you stood near enough, no work of art but naturalised at length. I often discovered him unexpectedly amid the pads and the gray willows when he moved, fishing in some old country method—for youth and age then went a-fishing together—full of incommunicable thoughts, perchance about his own Tyne and Northumberland. He was always to be seen in serene afternoons haunting the river, and almost rustling with the sedge ; so many sunny hours in an old man’s life, entrapping silly fish ; almost grown to be the sun’s familiar ; what need had he of hat or raiment any, having served out his time, and seen through such thin disguises. I have seen how his coeval fates rewarded him with the yellow perch, and yet I thought his luck was not in proportion to his years ; and I have seen when, with slow steps and weighed down with aged thoughts, he disappeared with his fish under his low-roofed house on the skirts of the village. I think nobody else saw him ; nobody else remembers him now, for he soon after died, and migrated to new Tyne streams. His fishing was not a sport, not solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles.”

Beside the river-scene above quoted may be set one of the many sea-pictures from *Cape Cod* :

“ At length we reached the seemingly retreating boundary of the plain, and entered what had appeared at a distance an upland marsh, but proved to be dry sand, covered with beach-grass, the

bearberry, bayberry, shrub-oaks, and beach-plum, slightly ascending as we approached the shore ; then, crossing over a belt of sand on which nothing grew, though the roar of the sea sounded scarcely louder than before, and we were prepared to go half a mile farther, we suddenly stood on the edge of a bluff overlooking the Atlantic. Far below us was the beach, from half a dozen to a dozen rods in width, with a long line of breakers rushing to the strand. The sea was exceedingly dark and stormy, the sky completely overcast, the clouds still dropping rain, and the wind seemed to blow not so much as the exciting cause, as from sympathy with the already agitated ocean. The waves broke on the bars at some distance from the shore, and curving green or yellow as if over so many unseen dams, ten or twelve feet high, like a thousand waterfalls, rolled in foam to the sand. There was nothing but that savage ocean between us and Europe. . . . The breakers looked like droves of a thousand wild horses of Neptune, rushing to the shore, with their white manes streaming far behind ; and when, at length, the sun shone for a moment, their manes were rainbow-tinted. Also, the long kelp-weed was tossed up from time to time, like the tails of sea-cows sporting in the brine."

Those of Thoreau's shorter essays which deal with natural history and outdoor life are to be found reprinted in *Excursions*, a volume published the year after his death, with the well-known prefatory memoir by Emerson. These *Excursions* have been described as "landscapes in miniature, embracing every feature of New England summers and winters."¹ There is a wild, racy, indefinable charm about them which is all their own ; they are by no means well "finished" and rounded off, when viewed from an artistic—or shall we say artificial—stand-

¹ Prof. Nichol's *American Literature*.

point ; for Thoreau loves to gossip on without regard to the laws of essay-writing, and will not deny himself the pleasure of quoting largely, when the whim takes him, from his favourite poets, or from the old prose chroniclers who wrote of the places which he visited, nor will he spare the minutest details which concern his own experiences. Yet the final effect—the only true criterion of success—is altogether delightful ; and no reader who has once caught and appreciated the rare mystic flavour of these wildings of literature could ever regret that they were not subjected to the conventional pruning. They can no more be taken to the literary market and weighed in the critical balance than their prototype the “wild apples,” which furnished Thoreau with one of his choicest themes :

“There is thus about all natural products a certain volatile and ethereal quality which represents their highest value, and which cannot be vulgarised, or bought or sold. No mortal has ever enjoyed the perfect flavor of any fruit, and only the godlike among men begin to taste its ambrosial qualities. When I see a particularly mean man carrying a load of fair and fragrant early apples to market, I seem to see a contest going on between him and his horse on the one side, and the apples on the other, and, to my mind, the apples always gain it. Our driver begins to lose his load the moment he tries to transport them to where they do not belong, that is, to any but the most beautiful. Though he gets out from time to time, and feels of them, and thinks they are all there, I see the stream of their evanescent and celestial qualities going to heaven from his cart, while the pulp and skin and core only are going to market. They are not apples, but pomace.”

The “Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers,” which

are included in the *Yankee in Canada* volume, are more direct and didactic in aim than the *Excursions*, and consequently far less discursive and impalpable. Some of Thoreau's most brilliant and pungent sayings are to be found in these essays, of which the very best are the *Plea for John Brown* (the most impassioned of all his writings) and *Life without Principle*, which conveys in brief form the sum and substance of his protest against the follies of modern society.

The original source which provided material for all these essays and volumes was the daily journal, which was kept by Thoreau with great fulness and regularity from 1837, the year when he left college, to a short time before his death in 1862, and amounted in all to no less than thirty large volumes. This diary formed a complete record of his outward and inward life, and was not a mere collection of chance jottings, but a private autobiography, written throughout with the utmost seriousness and devotion. He has himself recorded¹ the view he took of this introspective discipline :

"My journal is that of me which would else spill over and run to waste, gleanings from the field which in action I reap. I must not live for it, but in it, for the gods. They are my correspondent, to whom daily I send off this sheet, post-paid. I am a clerk in their counting-room, and at evening transfer the account from day-book to ledger. It is a leaf which hangs over my head in the path. I bend the twig, and write my prayers on it ; then, letting it go, the bough springs up and shows the scrawl to

¹ 8th February 1841.

heaven, as if it were not kept shut in my desk, but were as public a leaf as any in nature. It is papyrus by the river-side, it is vellum in the pastures, it is parchment on the hills. Like the sere leaves in yonder vase, these have been gathered far and wide. Upland and lowland, forest and field, have been ransacked."

Nor was the diary useful merely as a record of facts and thoughts, but also as a means of stimulating and chronicling further meditations. "Associate reverently," he says, "and as much as you can, with your loftiest thoughts. Each thought that is welcomed and recorded is a nest-egg, by the side of which another will be laid. Thoughts accidentally thrown together become a frame in which more may be developed and exhibited. Perhaps this is the main value of a habit of writing and keeping a journal—that is, we remember our best draught and stimulate ourselves."

We have seen, in the story of Thoreau's life, how his daily walks were not, as with most men, a time of leisure and recreation, but an essential part of his day's work and of his duties as poet-naturalist. He went to hill-top, or forest, or swamp, or river-bank, not as an aimless wanderer seeking to while away an afternoon, but as an inspector going his rounds; and he paid his visits deliberately and on principle to such animals, birds, nests, trees, or flowers as he happened to have under observation. He took notes on the spot,¹ even when he walked,

¹ "An Irishman who saw me in the fields making a minute in my note-book took it for granted that I was casting up my wages, and actually inquired what they came to."—*Journal*, 3d April 1859.

as was frequently the case, in the night-time; and on his return home he expanded these notes into graphic descriptions, interspersed with appropriate meditations, which sometimes, in the earlier volumes of the journal, took the form of verse. His notes on natural history constitute a large portion of the diary, and are often tinged with that tone of mysticism which so largely dominated his character. The following extracts are a fair specimen of his record for a summer day:

"18th June 1853, 4 A.M.—By boat to Nashawtuck. Almost all birds appear to join the early morning chorus before sunrise on the roost, the matin hymn. I hear now the robin, the chip-bird, the blackbird, the martin, etc., but I see none flying, or at least only one wing in the air not yet illumined by the sun. I think the blossom of the sweet brier, eglantine (now in prime), is more delicate and interesting than that of the common wild roses, though smaller and paler and without their spicy fragrance. But its fragrance is in its leaves all summer, and the form of the bush is handsomer, curving over from a considerable height in wreaths sprinkled with numerous flowers. They open out flat soon after sunrise. Flowers whitish in middle, then pinkish rose, inclining to purple towards the edges. How far from our minds now the early blossoms of the spring, the willow catkins, for example.

"P.M.—To Island by boat. The first white lily to-day perhaps. It is the only *bud* I have seen. The river has gone down and left it nearly dry. On the Island, where a month ago plants were so fresh and early, it is now parched and crisp under my feet. I feel the heat reflected from the ground and perceive the dry scent of grass and leaves. So universally on dry and rocky hills, where the spring was earliest, the autumn has already commenced.

"8.30 P.M.—To cliffs. Moon not quite full. There is no wind. The greenish fires of lightning-bugs are already seen in

the meadow. I almost lay my hand on one amid the leaves as I get over the fence at the brook. I hear the whip-poor-wills on different sides. White flowers alone show much at night, as white clover and white weed. The day has gone by with its wind like the wind of a cannon-ball, and now far in the west it blows. By that dun-coloured sky you may track it. There is no motion nor sound in the woods along which I am walking. The trees stand like great screens against the sky. The distant village sounds are the barking of dogs,—that animal with which man has allied himself,—and the rattling of waggons, for the farmers have gone into town a-shopping this Saturday night. The dog is the tamed wolf, as the villager is the tamed savage. Near at hand the crickets are heard in the grass chirping from everlasting to everlasting. The humming of a dor-bug drowns all the noise of the village, so roomy is the universe. The moon comes out of the mackerel cloud, and the traveller rejoices. How can a man write the same thoughts by the light of the moon, resting his book on a rail by the side of a remote potato-field, that he does by the light of the sun at his study table? The light is but a luminousness. My pencil seems to move through a creamy, mystic medium. The moonlight is rich and somewhat opaque, like cream, but the daylight is thin and blue, like skimmed milk. I am less conscious than in the presence of the sun—my instincts have more influence.

“The farmer has improved the dry weather to burn his meadow. I love the smell of that burning as a man may his pipe. It reminds me of a new country offering sites for the hearths of men. It is cheering as the scent of the peat-fire of the first settler.

“I passed into and along the bottom of a lake of cold and dewy evening air. Anon, as I rise higher, here comes a puff of warm air, trivially warm, a straggler from the sun’s retinue, now buffeted about by the vanguard night breezes. Before me, southward toward the moon, on higher land than I, but springy, I saw a low film of fog, like a veil, reflecting the moonlight, though none on lower ground which was not springy, and up the river beyond, a battalion of fog rising white in the moonlight in ghostlike wisps, or like a flock of sacred covenanters in a recess amid the hills.

It is worth while to walk thus in the night after a warm or sultry day, to enjoy the fresh, up-country, brake-like, spring-like scent in low grounds. At night the surface of the earth is a cellar, a refrigerator, no doubt wholesomer than those made with ice by day. Got home at 11."

From this journal Thoreau drew freely when preparing his essays or lectures, as the case might be; but, before being given to the world, every passage and sentence underwent further careful revision. After his death the unpublished manuscripts and diaries remained for fourteen years in the charge of his sister Sophia, who, at her death in 1876, bequeathed them to her brother's friend and correspondent, Mr. Blake. Portions of the journal have since been edited by Mr. Blake under the titles of *Early Spring in Massachusetts*, *Summer*, and *Winter*, various passages, written in different years, being grouped together according to the days on which they were written, so as to give a connected picture of the seasons. This arrangement was apparently foreshadowed by Thoreau, who makes a note in his journal of "a book of the seasons, each page of which should be written in its own season and out of doors, or in its own locality, wherever it may be." The years represented in these volumes are mostly between 1850 and 1860, the Walden period having presumably been almost exhausted by Thoreau himself.¹

¹ It has been noticed by a writer in the *Academy*, 1884, that the published journal contains no dates between 10th April and 1st June. This deficiency is, however, to some extent supplied by the extracts

A volume of Thoreau's *Letters* was edited by Emerson in 1865. He was not what is known as a "regular correspondent," and the number of his extant letters is not very great. "Not to have written a note for a year," he said, "is with me a very venial offence. Some are accustomed to write many letters, others very few; I am one of the last." The letters included in the published volume are, as a rule, much more severely transcendental in tone than the essays and diaries—"abominably didactic," Channing called them—and their seriousness is seldom relieved by the dry humour of *Walden*. It seems that Emerson, in selecting them, made it his object to exhibit a "perfect piece of stoicism," and therefore inserted only a very few of the domestic letters, which showed the other and tenderer side of Thoreau's character—an arrangement which was justly described by Sophia Thoreau as not quite fair to her brother. "His correspondence," says Mr. Sanborn, "as a whole is much more affectionate and less pugnacious than would appear from the published volume. He was fond of dispute, but those who knew him best loved him most." It is satisfactory to know that Mr. Sanborn will probably some day edit another batch of the letters, consisting chiefly of those addressed to Thoreau's own family and to Emerson. This will be a valuable corrective of the partial impression created by the earlier volume.

given in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1878 under the titles "April Days" and "May Days."

Last in the list of Thoreau's writings there remains to be considered his poetry. Strictly speaking, he can hardly be called a poet at all, for, although he had a large gift of the poetic inspiration, he lacked the lyrical fire and melodious utterance which are at least equally indispensable to the creation of a true poem ; his verses are, therefore, interesting less for their own intrinsic value than for the light they indirectly throw on his personality and genius. The description which Emerson gave of his own poetic talent may be applied *totidem verbis* to that of Thoreau. "I am born a poet—of a low class without a doubt, yet a poet. My singing, be sure, is very husky, and is for the most part in prose. Still, I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter, and specially of the correspondence between these and those."

Thoreau's poems were mostly written from 1837 to 1847, when he was between twenty and thirty years of age. It was his method to jot down in his journal a stanza or two from time to time, and afterwards to combine these scattered pieces into a connected poem, each verse of which would thus be brief, pointed, and sententious. He had been strongly influenced by his early readings in the minor Elizabethan school, and the resemblance in his style to that of Herbert, Cowley, and other writers of that era is very striking, his poetry being distinctly of the same gnomic order, abounding in

quaint conceits, thrifty maxims, and elaborate antitheses, with here and there a dainty stanza or series of stanzas, marked by deep insight and felicitous expression. His idea of the poet's vocation is characteristic. The poet is "no tender slip of fairy stock, but the toughest son of earth and heaven, and by his greater strength and endurance his fainting companions will recognise the god in him. He will hit the nail on the head, and we shall not know the strength of his hammer." Thus in his poems he is less the artist than the moralist; but the delicacy and nobility of the thought often lift the rough unpolished lines out of the region of commonplace, and make them pleasing and memorable. Such is the case with the stanzas entitled "*Sic Vita*" and "*Inspiration*," parts of which have already been quoted. There are also some exquisite idyllic touches in the verses on "*Smoke*," and one or two of the other short pieces of blank verse:

"Light-winged Smoke! Icarian bird,
Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight;
Lark without song, and messenger of dawn,
Circling above the hamlets as thy nest;
Or else, departing dream and shadowy form
Of midnight vision, gathering up thy skirts;
By night star-veiling, and by day
Darkening the light and blotting out the sun;
Go thou, my incense, upward from this hearth,
And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame."

These lines were declared by Emerson to be "better than any poem of Simonides," though as a rule he

did not admire Thoreau's poetical efforts. "His verses," he says, "are often rude and defective. The thyme and marjoram are not yet honey. But if he want lyric fineness and technical merits, if he have not the poetic temperament, he never lacks the causal thought, showing that his genius was better than his talent." These qualities are fully exemplified in an almost unknown poem of Thoreau's entitled "*Annus Mirabilis*":

- "Thank God who seasons thus the year,
And sometimes kindly slants his rays,
For in his winter he's most near,
And plainest seen upon the shortest days.
- "Who gently tempers now his heats,
And then his harsher cold, lest we
Should surfeit on the summer's sweets,
Or pine upon the winter's crudity.
- "A sober mind will walk alone,
Apart from nature, if need be,
And only its own seasons own ;
For Nature leaving its humanity.
- "Sometimes a late autumnal thought
Has crossed my mind in green July,
And to its early freshness brought
Late-ripened fruits and an autumnal sky.
- "The evening of the year draws on,
The fields a later aspect wear ;
Since summer's garishness is gone,
Some grains of night tincture the noontide air.
- "Behold! the shadows of the trees
Now circle wider 'bout their stem,
Like sentries that by slow degrees
Perform their rounds, gently protecting them.

“Far in the woods, these golden days,
Some leaf obeys its maker's call;
And through their hollow aisles it plays
With delicate touch the prelude of the Fall.

“Gently withdrawing from its stem,
It lightly lays itself along,
Where the same hand hath pillowed them,
Resigned to sleep upon the old year's throng.”

Many of Thoreau's early poems found publication in the *Dial*, and met with much ridicule in critical and anti-transcendental circles; we are told that an unquenchable laughter, “like that of the gods at Vulcan's limping, went up over his ragged and halting lines.”¹ He afterwards included some of these pieces in the *Week* and other prose volumes, preferring, after the discontinuance of the *Dial*, not to publish them separately, but “as choruses or hymns or word-pictures, to illustrate the movement of his thought.”² He told Mr. Sanborn during his last illness that he had destroyed many of his verses because Emerson did not praise them, an act which he afterwards regretted. No complete collection of Thoreau's poems has ever been issued; but a large number of them may be found in the *Dial* and the *Week*, and some of the best were reprinted in an appendix to the volume of *Letters*. But in spite of the meritorious qualities of which I have spoken, the final conclusion of the

¹ John Weiss, *Christian Examiner*, 1865.

² *The Critic*, 26th March 1881.

reader will probably be that the best poetry of Thoreau's nature found expression in his prose. "Great prose of equal elevation," he thinks, "commands our respect more than great verse, since it implies a more permanent and level height, and a life pervaded with the grandeur of the thought. The poet only makes an irruption, like a Parthian, and is off again, shooting while he retreats; but the prose writer has conquered, like a Roman, and settled colonies." If he did not altogether write as a poet, he seldom failed to live as one; in his own words—

"My life has been the poem I would have writ,
But I could not both live and utter it."

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

THUS, as we have seen, the most vigorous protest ever raised against that artificiality in life and literature which constitutes one of the chief dangers of our complex civilisation proceeded not from some sleepy old-world province, which might have been expected to be unable to keep pace with a progressive age, but from the heart of the busiest and most advanced nation on the globe—it is to Yankee-land that we owe the example and the teaching of the Walden hermit and bachelor of nature. The personality of Thoreau is so singular and so unique that it seems useless to attempt, as some have done, to draw out any elaborate parallel between his character and that of other social, or un-social, reformers, who have protested against some prevalent tendency in the age in which they lived. Those who are interested in seeking for literary prototypes may perhaps, in this case, find one in Abraham Cowley, a member of that school of gnomic poets with which Thoreau was so familiar,

and moreover a zealous lover of the peace and solitude of nature. He lived in close retirement during the later years of his life, and his death, which, like Thoreau's, was due to a cold caught while he was botanising, is attributed by his biographer to "his very delight in the country and the fields, which he had long fancied above all other pleasures." Some of Cowley's remarks in his essays on solitude are conceived in a spirit very similar to that of Thoreau. "The First Minister of State," he says, "has not so much business in public as a wise man in private; if the one has little leisure to be alone, the other has less leisure to be in company; the one has but part of the affairs of one nation, the other all the works of God and nature under his consideration"; and elsewhere he expresses the wish that men could "unravel all they have woven, that we might have our woods and our innocence again, instead of our castles and our policies." But these parallels, between two men of widely different periods and purposes, can contain nothing more than slight and superficial resemblances. Nor, except for his general connection with Emerson and the transcendentalists, is it more easy to match Thoreau with any ethical writer of his own generation.¹

¹ It is interesting to observe that of late years a body of social reformers has arisen in England whose doctrines are largely in accord with those of Thoreau. *England's Ideal*, a volume of essays published in 1887 by Edward Carpenter, is worthy to rank with *Walden* in the literature of "plain living and high thinking."

As a poet-naturalist, however, Thoreau is distinctly akin to Richard Jefferies and one or two other writers of the same school. Jefferies' character was richer and more sensuous than Thoreau's, but they had the same mystic religious temperament, the same impatience of tradition and conventionality, the same passionate love of woods and fields and streams, and the same gift of brilliant language in which to record their observations. It is curious to compare these modern devotees of country life with the old-fashioned naturalists of whom Izaak Walton and Gilbert White are the most illustrious examples. While the honest old angler prattles on contentedly, like the babbling streams by which he spent his days, with here and there a pious reflection on the beneficence of Providence and the adaptation of means to ends, and while the kindly naturalist of Selborne devotes himself absolutely and unreservedly to the work of chronicling the fauna and flora of the district about which he writes, these later authors have brought to the treatment of similar subjects a far deeper insight into the beauty and pathos of nature, and a power of poetical description which was not dreamed of by their simple yet not less devoted predecessors. It is mainly to Thoreau in America, and to Jefferies in England, that we owe the recognition and study of what may be called the poetry of natural history—a style of thought and writing which is peculiar to the last thirty or forty

years. The study of nature has, of course, been from time immemorial one of the great subjects of poetry, but, so far, it was nature in its more general aspects; it was not till comparatively recent years that there was discovered to be poetry also in the accurate and patient observation of natural phenomena. We have now learnt that natural history, which was formerly regarded as a grave and meritorious study of a distinctly prosaic kind, may be made to yield material for the most imaginative and poetical reflections.

When Thoreau died in 1862, Richard Jefferies was a boy of fourteen, busily engaged among his native Wiltshire Downs in laying the foundation of his wonderful knowledge of outdoor life. As far as I am aware, there is no mention of Thoreau in his writings, nor any indication that he had read him; yet one is often struck by suggestive resemblances in their manner of thought. Take, for instance, that half-serious, half-whimsical contention of Thoreau's, which has probably been more misunderstood than any other of his sayings—that Concord, in its natural features, contains all the phenomena that travellers have noted elsewhere—and compare it with the following opinion expressed by Jefferies. “I found that the reeds, and ferns, and various growths through which I pushed my way, explained to me the jungles of India, the swamps of Central Africa, and the backwoods of America; all the vegetation of the world. Repre-

sentatives exist in our own woods, hedges, and fields, or by the shore of inland waters. It was the same with flowers. I think I am scientifically accurate in saying that every known plant has a relative of the same species or genus growing wild in this country. . . . It has long been one of my fancies that this country is an epitome of the natural world, and that if any one has come really into contact with its productions, and is familiar with them, and what they mean and represent, then he has a knowledge of all that exists on the earth.”¹ In reading these words, one has a difficulty in remembering that they were not written by Thoreau.

The association of Thoreau's name with the district in which he lived and died is likely to become closer and closer as the years go on. Great nature-lovers, it has been truly remarked, have the faculty of stamping the impress of their own character on whole regions of country, so that there are certain places which belong by supreme and indisputable right to certain persons who have made them peculiarly and perpetually their own. As the Lake District is inseparably connected with the names of the poets who dwelt and wrote there ; as the Scotch border-land owns close allegiance to Scott, and the Ayrshire fields to Burns ; and as the little Hampshire village of Selborne is the inalienable

¹ *The Life of the Fields* ; essay on “Sport and Science.”

property of Gilbert White—so the thoughts of those who visit Concord turn inevitably to Thoreau. “Thoreau’s affections and genius,” says one of his admirers, “were so indissolubly bound up with this country that now he is gone he presents himself to my mind as one of these local genii or deified men whom the Scandinavian mythology gave as guardians to the northern coasts and mountains. These beings kept off murrain from the cattle and sickness from men. They made the nights sweet and salubrious, and the days productive. If Thoreau had lived in the early ages of Greece, he would have taken his place in the popular imagination along with his favourite god Pan.”

That a personality so stubbornly and aggressively independent as Thoreau’s would be a stumbling-block to many critics, good and bad alike, might have been foreseen, and indeed *was* foreseen, from the first. “What an easy task it would be,” said one who understood him unusually well,¹ “for a lively and not entirely scrupulous pen to ridicule his notions, and raise such a cloud of ink in the clear medium as entirely to obscure his true and noble traits.” Just three months after these prophetic words were written appeared Mr. Lowell’s criticism of Thoreau in the *North American Review*, in which, while paying reluctant tribute to his literary mastery, he made merry over his character and ethical

¹ John Weiss, *Christian Examiner*, July 1865.

opinions, holding up to ridicule his supposed conceit, indolence, selfishness, misanthropy, valetudinarianism, and lack of humour. "The radical vice of his theory of life," says Mr. Lowell, "was that he confounded physical with spiritual remoteness from men. One is far enough withdrawn from his fellows if he keep himself clear of their weaknesses." That a confusion of physical with spiritual remoteness should be attributed to Thoreau of all writers is an astounding piece of criticism which must have made many a reader of *Walden* rub his eyes; for one of the truths emphasised in that book with peculiar insistence is that it is possible to be farthest removed from a man at the very time when one is nearest to him in the body. Indeed, Mr. Lowell has himself manifested the weakness of his own assertion by stating, on the same page of the same article, that Thoreau's *Walden* shanty was a sham, because his actual remoteness from his townsmen was there so inconsiderable. He once saw, he says, "a genuine solitary, who spent his winters 150 miles beyond all human communication." In other words, he blames Thoreau first for living as much as two miles from his fellow-citizens, and then for not living as much as 150. Such captious criticism would be laughable enough in itself were it not for the fact that, coming with the authority of a great name, it has prejudiced many a reader against Thoreau's writings before he has made fair trial of them for himself.

"A skulker" is the phrase in which Mr. R. L.

Stevenson summed up Thoreau's character in his essay in *Men and Books*; but as he himself admits in the later written preface that he had quite misread Thoreau through lack of sufficient knowledge of his life, there is no reason why admirers of *Walden* should feel much disturbed at the bestowal of that singularly inappropriate appellation. Other critics, again, while enjoying much of Thoreau's writing, have been haunted by a suspicion that he was the victim of a theatrical self-consciousness, and that he became a hermit rather to attract attention than to avoid it. "We have a mistrust of the sincerity of the St. Simeon Stylites," said a contemporary reviewer of *Walden*,¹ "and suspect that they come down from the pillars in the night-time when nobody is looking at them. Diogenes placed his tub where Alexander would be sure of seeing it, and Mr. Thoreau ingeniously confesses that he went out to dine." So inconceivable does it seem to those who have not considered, much less practised, a simple and frugal life, that a man should deliberately, and for his own pleasure, abandon what *they* believe to be luxuries and comforts, that critics

¹ *Putnam's Magazine*, Oct. 1854. See also Mr. Grant Allen's remarks in the *Fortnightly Review*, May 1888: "Like a true Pythagorean, he cultivated chiefly the domestic bean, finding it on the whole the cheapest food on which man can sustain life in the woods of Massachusetts. In all this I wish I could always feel quite sure that Thoreau was *au fond* thoroughly sincere." The statement of fact is here as unfortunate as the inference drawn from it. The Pythagoreans made a point of *not* eating beans, and Thoreau informs us that he was a Pythagorean in this respect, and exchanged his beans for other food.

are always discovering some far-fetched and non-existent object in the Walden experiment, while they miss its true and salutary lessons. "Thoreau," says Dr. E. W. Emerson, "is absurdly misconceived by most people. He did not wish that every one should live in isolated cabins in the woods, on Indian corn and beans and cranberries. His own Walden camping was but a short experimental episode, and even then this really very human and affectionate man constantly visited his friends in the village, and was a most dutiful son and affectionate brother. It is idle for cavilling Epicureans to announce as a great discovery that he sometimes took supper comfortably at a friend's house, or was too good a son to churlishly thumb back the cake that his good mother had specially made for him. He was not like the little men of that day who magnified trifles of diet until they could think of little else."

Thoreau's "lack of ambition" was another point that caused him to be much misunderstood—even Emerson gave his sanction to this rather futile complaint. "I cannot help counting it a fault in him," he said, "that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans!" But the obvious answer to this criticism is that, in Thoreau's case, it was *not* only beans. The chapter on "The Bean Field," in *Walden*, is

one of the most imaginative and mystic in all his works—"it was no longer beans that I hoed," he says, "nor I that hoed beans"—for the object of his quest and labour was not the actual huckleberry nor the tangible bean, but the glorified and idealised fruit of a lifetime spent in communion with nature, which imparted to his writings a freshness and fragrance as of nature itself. In this matter Thoreau was the wisest judge of his own powers, and conferred a far greater benefit on the human race by writing *Walden* than he could have done by engineering for all America. "No bribe," says Channing, "could have drawn him from his native fields, where his ambition was—a very honorable one—to fairly represent himself in his works, accomplishing as perfectly as lay in his power what he conceived his business. His eye and ear and hand fitted in with the special task he undertook—certainly as manifest a destiny as any man's ever was."

The conclusion of the whole matter is, that Thoreau is a hopeless subject for corrective criticism; it is easy to point out that he would have been wiser had he done this or had he omitted to do that; but the fact remains that he had a clear and definite object before him which he followed with inflexible earnestness, and that his very faults and limitations subserved the main purpose of his life. "There is a providence in his writings," says one of his best interpreters,¹ "which ought to protect him

¹ John Weiss, *Christian Examiner*, 1865.

from the complaint that he was not somebody else. No man ever lived who paid more ardent and unselfish attention to his business. If pure minds are sent into the world upon errands, with strict injunction not to stray by other paths, Thoreau certainly was one of these elect. A great deal of criticism is inspired by the inability to perceive the function and predestined quality of the man who passes in review. It only succeeds in explaining the difference between him and the critic. Such a decided fact as a man of genius is ought to be gratefully accepted and interpreted."

That Thoreau's doctrines, no less than his character, have their shortcomings and imperfections, few will be disposed to deny. He could not realise, or perhaps did not care to realise, the immense scope and complexity of the whole social problem; he had scarcely the data or opportunities for doing so; and in any case his intensely individualistic nature would probably have incapacitated him. We therefore cannot look to him for any full and satisfactory solution of the difficulties by which our modern civilisation is surrounded, but it would be a great error to conclude that we are not to look to him at all. If it is true that the deadlock resulting from the antagonism of labour and capital can never be relieved without external legislation, it is equally true that there can be no real regeneration of society without the self-improvement of the individual man; it is idle to assert that the one or the

other must come first—*both* are necessary, and the two must be carried on side by side. In Thoreau the social instinct was deficient or undeveloped; but, on the other hand, he has set forth the gospel of the higher intellectual individualism with more force and ability than any modern writer; if it be but a half-truth that he preaches, it is none the less a half-truth of the utmost moment and significance.¹

We have seen that he was not, like Emerson, a philosopher of wide far-reaching sympathies and cautious judicial temperament, but rather a prophet and monitor—outspoken, unsparing, trenchant, inexorable, irreconcilable. He addressed himself to the denunciation and correction of certain popular tendencies which he perceived to be mischievous and delusive, and preached what may be comprehensively termed a gospel of simplicity, in direct antagonism to the prevailing tone of a self-indulgent and artificial society. Who will venture to say that the protest was not needed then—that it is not still more needed now? “The years which have passed,” says a well-known writer,² “since Thoreau came back out of Walden wood, to attend to his father’s business of pencil-making, have added more than the previous

¹ “As to Thoreau,” says Edward Carpenter, “the real truth about him is that he was a thorough economist. He reduced life to its simplest terms, and having, so to speak, labor in his right hand and its reward in his left, he had no difficulty in seeing what was worth laboring for and what was not, and no hesitation in discarding things which he did not think *worth* the time or trouble of production.”—*England’s Ideal*.

² Mr. T. Hughes, *Academy*, 17th Nov. 1877.

century to the trappings and baggage of social life, which he held, and taught by precept and example, that men would be both better and happier for doing without. And while we succumb and fall year by year more under the dominion of these trappings, and life gets more and more overlaid with one kind and another of upholsteries, the idea of something simpler and nobler probably never haunted men's minds more than at this time." Herein lies the strength of Thoreau's position, and the assurance of the ultimate recognition of the essential wisdom of his teaching—the very excess of the evil, which turns our supposed comforts into discomforts and our luxuries into burdens, must at last induce us to listen to the voice of sobriety and reason.

As to the manner in which Thoreau expresses his convictions nothing more need here be said, except that his style is justly adapted to his sentiments. His "knock-down blows at current opinion" are likened by Mr. R. L. Stevenson to the "posers" of a child, "which leave the orthodox in a kind of speechless agony." "They know the thing is nonsense—they are sure there must be an answer, yet somehow they cannot find it." We may shrewdly doubt whether the conclusive answer will ever be forthcoming; but it is something that people should be at all aroused from the complacent lethargy of custom and tradition. Thoreau is thus seen to have a quickening, stimulating, and, at times, exasperating effect as an ethical teacher; it is no part of his

object to prophesy smooth things, to deal tenderly with the weaknesses of his readers, or even to explain those features of his doctrine which, from their novelty or unpopularity, are most likely to be misunderstood. This being so, his character and writings were certain to prove as distasteful to some readers as they are attractive to others; if he is a good deal misapplied at present, time will set that right. "The generation he lectured so sharply," says John Burroughs, "will not give the same heed to his words as will the next and the next. The first effect of the reading of his books upon many minds is irritation and disappointment; the perception of their beauty and wisdom comes later on."

In conclusion, we see in Thoreau the extraordinary product of an extraordinary era—his strange, self-centred, solitary figure, unique in the annals of literature, challenges attention by its originality, audacity, and independence. He had, it has been well remarked, "a constitutional *No* in him"; he renounced much that other men held dear, and set his heart on objects which to the world seemed valueless; it was part of his mission to question, to deny, to contradict. But his genius was not only of the negative and destructive order. In an age when not one man in a thousand had a real sympathy with nature, he attained to an almost miraculous acquaintance with her most cherished secrets; in an age of pessimism, when most men, as he himself expresses it, "lead lives of quiet despera-

tion," he was filled with an absolute confidence in the justice and benevolence of his destiny; in an age of artificial complexity, when the ideal is unduly divorced from the practical, and society stands in false antagonism to nature, he, a devout pantheist, saw everywhere simplicity, oneness, relationship. In his view God was not to be considered apart from the material world, nor was man to be set above and aloof from the rest of creation and the lower forms of life; he tracked everywhere the same divine intelligence—"inanimate" nature there was none, since all was instinct with the same universal spirit. It was his purpose, in a word, "to civilise nature with the highest intuitions of the mind, which show her simplicity to restless and artificial men."

This ideal he pursued, as we have seen, with a rare courage, sincerity, and self-devotion. Whether he succeeded or failed in his endeavour is a question which time alone can fully answer. His example and doctrines were coldly and incredulously received during his lifetime by most of those with whom he came in contact, and his comparatively early death cut him off, in the prime of his vigour, from reaping the harvest he had sown with such patience and assiduity; so far his career, like that of most idealists, must be confessed a failure. But these are not the tests by which idealists, least of all Thoreau, can be judged. For he enjoyed, in the first place, that priceless and inalienable success which consists in perfect serenity of mind and contentment with one's

own fortunes. "If the day and night," he says in *Walden*, "are such that you greet them with joy, and life emits a fragrance like flowers and sweet-scented herbs—is more elastic, starry, and immortal—that is your success." And, secondly, he had the assurance, which is seldom denied to a great man, that the true value of his work would ultimately be recognised and appreciated. During the quarter of a century that has passed since his death his fame has steadily increased both in America and England, and is destined to increase yet further.

The blemishes and mannerisms of Thoreau's character are written on its surface, easy to be read by the indifferent passer-by who may miss the strong and sterling faculties that underlie them. His lack of geniality, his rusticity, his occasional littleness of tone and temper, his impatience of custom, degenerating sometimes into injustice, his too sensitive self-consciousness, his trick of overstatement in the expression of his views—these were incidental failings which did not mar the essential nobility of his nature. We shall do wisely in taking him just as he is, neither shutting our eyes to his defects nor greatly deploring their existence, but remembering that in so genuine and distinctive an individuality the faults have their due place and proportion no less than the virtues. Had he added the merits he lacked to those which he possessed, had he combined the social with the individual qualities, had he been more catholic in his philosophy

and more guarded in his expression, then we might indeed have admired him more, but should scarcely have loved him so well, for his character, whatever it gained in fulness, would have missed the peculiar freshness and piquancy which are now its chief attraction—whatever else he might have been, he would not have been Thoreau.

APPENDIX

THOREAU'S PARENTAGE.

It is said that the name Thoreau was common in the annals of Tours several hundred years ago. The earliest fact that is known of Henry Thoreau's ancestry is that his great-grandparents, Philip Thoreau and Marie le Galais, were well-to-do inhabitants of St. Helier, Jersey, in the middle of the last century. They had several sons, one of whom, John Thoreau, emigrated to New England about 1773, when twenty years old, and married a Scotchwoman, Jane Burns, at Boston. The offspring of this marriage was one son, John Thoreau the younger, the father of the Concord philosopher, and four daughters, one of whom, Maria Thoreau, lived till 1881. The Thoreau family is now extinct both in Jersey and New England.

PORTRAITS OF THOREAU.

There are three portraits of Thoreau which have been reproduced in various forms.

- (1) A crayon done by S. W. Roose in 1854, before the time when Thoreau wore a beard. This is the one commonly engraved, as in the first edition of *Excursions in Field and Forest*, 1863, and in the frontispiece to this volume.
- (2) A photograph by Critcherson, taken at Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1857 or 1858 (not in 1861, as has been wrongly stated). Thoreau here appears with a fringe of beard on his throat, but with lips and chin shaven. An engraving from this portrait was given in the *Century* magazine, July 1882.

- (3) An ambrotype photograph, taken by Dunshee at New Bedford, at the request of Mr. Daniel Ricketson, in August 1861, when Thoreau was wearing a full beard and moustache. This is the original of the portrait prefixed to Mr. Sanborn's *Thoreau*; see also the *Critic*, March 26, 1881. From this photograph a bas-relief medallion head, in profile, life-size, was produced by Mr. Walton Ricketson, the son of Thoreau's friend, in which Thoreau's firm profile and strongly-marked aquiline features are well shown. An engraving from a photograph of this medallion may be seen in the *Welcome*, Nov. 1887.

It is stated in the *Critic*, April 9, 1881, by Mr. William Sloane Kennedy, that there is in existence a fourth portrait of Thoreau, bequeathed to a friend at Concord by Sophia Thoreau, with the request that it should not be reproduced.

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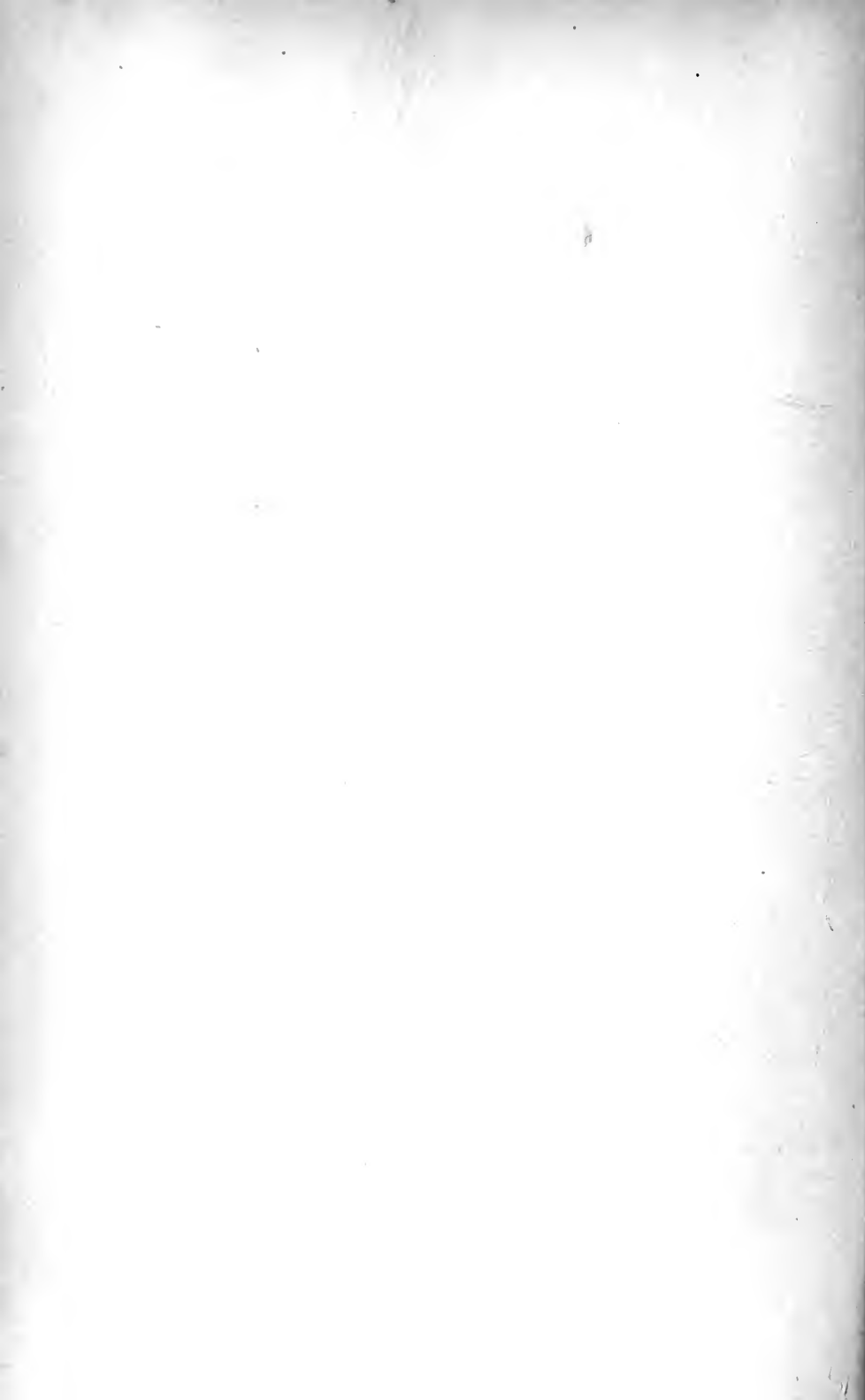
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